

Dr. Al Fuhr, Ecclesiastes, Session 5

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One of the issues that Ecclesiastes is best known for is Kohelet's preoccupation with death. And this inevitability of death motif that we find in the book of Ecclesiastes really does tend to paint a rather dire picture in the book.

We find that this motif comes up again and again and again. And as I mentioned, it seems like Kohelet is preoccupied with death and the inevitability of death. And there seems to be very little hope from the horizontal perspective by which he is undertaking this journey to find a resolution to the dilemma of life's falling condition.

And right from the very beginning, when mankind fell in Genesis chapter 3, we find that death is indeed the penalty for that fall. And so, it becomes something that permeates all of mankind's existence. In other words, we know that from the very time that we are born, we are on a pathway, a trajectory toward the grave.

And as Kohelet dwells upon the fleeting nature of life's transitory existence, moving towards the grave, he cannot get over the fact that whether one is wise, whether one is wealthy, whether one is a fool, whether one tempts fate or not, all mankind is heading in the same direction, the common grave. Now in the Old Testament, the theology of death and the afterlife is rather ambiguous. The Old Testament saints seem to know very little about man's existence after death.

But all throughout the Old Testament, you find references to death being a kind of thing to be feared, something to certainly not look forward to. Wisdom has the intention to try to stave off and put off the timing of one's death to elongate the years of one's life. And so, in the Old Testament, we do find glimpses regarding a theology of death and perhaps even an afterlife.

But these kinds of things are not fully revealed until we get to the New Testament, especially in reference to an eschatological existence for the individual, for mankind after the grave. Now in the Book of Ecclesiastes, you do find the word for the grave or for the afterlife realm in the Old Testament, sheol, a few times. The word sheol is found some 65 times in the Old Testament.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, the place where I always think of the word sheol being found is in the 6th of the 7th in Joy Life Refrains in Ecclesiastes chapter 9. In Ecclesiastes chapter 9 verse 7 reads, Go eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart for it is now that God favors what you do. In other words, Kohelet is very much aware of the present being the time of life because we're all heading towards that place, the grave, where there is no ability to be able to do the

things that in the present, we are capable of being able to undertake and perform. Always be clothed in white and always anoint your head with oil.

Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this hevel. I would suggest that in this context fleeting is probably being highlighted but the other families of meaning behind hevelness seem to not be very far off here. All this hevel life that God has given you under the sun, all your hevel days.

For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor and your amal under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. For in Sheol, the NIV translates this, for in the grave, where you are going there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

Wisdom can be practiced in the here and now but in the afterlife, there is no capacity for the practice of such wisdom. So, wisdom today must be implemented to give an advantage in this life. Wisdom is not able to resolve the dilemma of hevel and the inevitability of death that accompanies this.

Now in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word Sheol is typically translated as grave but it seems to point to something even more than just simply six feet under the ground. Sheol seems to refer to a place of gloominess, it's a place to be avoided. I would suggest that it is not necessarily referring to hell as the KJV about 30 some times does translate the word Sheol in the Old Testament.

I would suggest that it's not necessarily a place of active penalty and judgment but it does seem to be a place to be avoided in the Old Testament. And certainly, in the book of Ecclesiastes death is not something that is applauded or celebrated. It's not the idea that God's saints were going to be celebrated in their coming home as we would often like to think of in a funeral.

Death is something that is a part of God's judgment on this fallen world and this fallen existence that we all experience. It's natural but it's nevertheless something to be put off if at all possible. So, wisdom seeks to avoid premature death and to elongate the years of one's life.

But the problem for Kohelet is that even when a wise man does everything that wisdom suggests to do and does it in a timely manner, nevertheless he has no ability to ultimately control the day of his death. And even if he were able to do so it's not as if he through his wisdom could take away that which is eventually going to occur. In other words, there seems to be no resurrection language in the book of Ecclesiastes from the under the sun horizontal perspective.

Kohelet observes that the wise man, the king, the wealthy, the billionaires of his day, are all going to the same place as the animals from dust to dust. And so, this causes

no shortage of angst for our wise man Kohelet because he realizes that through the application of wisdom, he's not able to resolve the inevitability of death. He might not even be able to stave off the timing of one's death.

Death is something that happens to all individuals no matter what one's ability or whatever one's station in life might be. And so, the status and the achievements of life seem to have no bearing on the inevitable death that is to occur. In a few verses that reflect this kind of thinking in Ecclesiastes, chapter 2 and verse 14, the wise man has eyes in his head while the fool walks in darkness.

But I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. Then I thought in my heart the fate of the fool will overtake me also. Then what do I gain by being wise? It seems like Kohelet realizes that with the inevitability of death looming, there's no ultimate achievement that wisdom can bring to the table.

I said in my heart this too is heavy. For the wise man like the fool will not be long remembered, no lasting legacy. In days to come both will be forgotten.

Like the fool, the wise man too must die. All humankind is heading down the same trajectory towards the grave. In chapter 3 and verses 19 through 22, Kohelet reflects much the same.

He states man's fate is like that of the animals. The same fate awaits them both. Now this is not suggesting that in Kohelet's thinking and his theology, he is somehow misguided into thinking that there is no post-mortem existence or consciousness.

Again, think in terms of the theological context of the book of Ecclesiastes. He's observing things from an under-the-sun perspective. He's not necessarily proclaiming, thus saith the Lord, in a revelatory sense.

Also, in Kohelet's timing in God's revelation history, we're not dealing with the full revelation of truth to humankind through the scriptures. And so Kohelet's not necessarily privy to everything that we might be privy to in reading the New Testament. As a matter of fact, I would actually suggest to you, and we'll get into this later on, that Kohelet pushes the envelope forward so far as a theology of death in the afterlife is concerned.

There seem to be more hints in the book of Ecclesiastes as to an expectation of some kind of judgment after death than anywhere that I can think of in the Old Testament. While the book of Ecclesiastes doesn't go forward into suggesting that there will be a resurrection existence or a new heavens and a new earth or the existence of heaven versus hell or anything quite like that, it is interesting that the book of Ecclesiastes does seem to move beyond the present existence as a time of judgment and reckoning. And so that is something worth noting.

In any case, back to the text of chapter 3, Man's fate is like that of the animals, in other words, from dust to dust. In that sense, they're the same. The same fate awaits them both.

As one dies, so dies the other. So even something as stupid as an animal that cannot apply wisdom to life, we're all going to the same place, is the point that he's making. All have the same breath.

Man has no advantage in that sense over the animals. Everything is hevel. All go to the same place, all come from dust, and to dust all return.

In chapter 5 in verse 10, Kohelet states, Whoever loves money never has money enough. Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. How true is that? This, too, is hevel.

Greed and the excesses of gaining some kind of a mass of treasure in a world where ultimately all things are fleeting and you can't take anything with you, this is deemed as hevel. As goods increase, so do those who consume them. How true is that? And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them? Kohelet dwells upon the absurdity of just simply amassing things to look at them.

It makes me think about one of my relatives. In his old age, he used to look at his bank statements. For him, it was some sense of security.

But even as his children would tell him, you know, Pop, you're going not to live forever. You ought to spend some of those resources. And he just rejoiced in looking at his bank statements every month when they came in.

And he was amassing all these things for what? For nothing. He couldn't take anything with him. The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep.

I've seen a grievous evil, so it's a negative judgment under the sun, wealth hoarded up to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost to some misfortune. I think Kohelet would say that these things are hevel. So that when he has a son, there's nothing left for him.

So even though he might not be able to extend a lasting legacy, he can't even give an inheritance. Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, makes us think of Job, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand.

Essentially, Kohelet is saying, a wise man, a wealthy man, one who amasses and hoards great treasures, one who achieves great things, ultimately can take none of that with him to the grave. In chapter 9 and verse 2, Kohelet continues this line of thinking, all share a common destiny. The righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.

As it is with the good man, so with the sinner. As it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. This is the evil of everything that happens under the sun.

Again, great angst at these observations. The same destiny overtakes all. This is death, the common grave.

The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil, and there is madness in their hearts while they live. They strive, they're anxious to achieve something that ultimately they cannot take to the grave with them, and afterward, they join the dead. Anyone who is among the living has hope.

Kohelet definitely has a theology of present possibilities and the wisdom of applying oneself to the present. We still have hope as we live. Even a live dog is better off than a dead lion.

Again, Kohelet is not commenting here on the rewards that one might expect in the beam of the seed of judgment out of 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 12. Again, that's not within the purview of his thinking. He's thinking from an under the sun perspective, not a backslidden or in some way anti-God way of thinking.

It's just simply a limited perspective that the wise man applies to his observations in this world. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. They have no future reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten.

Again, just to make things very clear, I don't think Ecclesiastes here or Kohelet, our wise man, is suggesting here some form of annihilationism after death. I know that Jehovah's Witnesses, for instance, will oftentimes proof text out of Ecclesiastes chapter 3 and out of Ecclesiastes chapter 9 and verse 5 here, suggesting that the book of Ecclesiastes is teaching annihilationism. I remember one time having a conversation with a representative from the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society with the Jehovah's Witnesses.

I had brought a group of students to a particular thing that the Kingdom Hall was putting on just so that they could observe what the Jehovah's Witnesses do in this particular area. I had an opportunity to have a conversation with a representative from the Watchtower out of Brooklyn, New York. He was one of the head honchos, if you will, in the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.

I remember us having this conversation regarding Ecclesiastes and some of these statements regarding death. When I asked this gentleman about what the rest of Ecclesiastes had to teach and about Kohelet's perspective in his line of argument here and his limited perspective, not again a backslidden perspective, this gentleman really knew nothing about what the book of Ecclesiastes was saying or what it was teaching or the perspective that Kohelet was observing these things through, the lens that he was observing these things through, or his journey, his quest for finding Yitron in a Hebel world. He was simply looking at these things as proof texts that there would be no kind of conscious existence after life.

Again, I don't think that's what Ecclesiastes is saying here. He's just simply saying, as I observe things under the sun, I see that it is good to be alive, it is not good to be in the grave, and wisdom cannot take anything with you. As a matter of fact, wisdom cannot even stave off the inevitability of death.

Just as the dog is going to die, so too you are going to die. There's nothing more to it than Kohelet's line of thinking here. Now, beyond this idea that all die regardless of one's ability, regardless of one's status in life, the second idea that we find reflected in these musings on the inevitability of death is that the timing of one's death is ultimately determined by God.

Again, the wise man cannot make a plan and in effect take that plan to fruition, timing one's own death, obviously at a more profitable and beneficial period. Taking a look at a survey of verses that seem to suggest as much, in Ecclesiastes chapter 3 and verse 2, if there's any point in the poem on time where it seems that God's determinism is in view, it would probably be in the binary pairing between a time to be born and a time to die. You also find in chapter 7 and verses 14 through 18 that the idea of man not being able to control the timing of his death is front and center.

When times are good, be happy, but when times are bad, consider. God has made the one as well as the other, therefore man cannot discover anything about his future. And then later on, the admonition to not act the fool, to not be overly wicked, tempting fate.

In other words, God is going to bring you to judgment at some point eventually. Why die before your time? God might snuff you out for the sins that you commit. You've got in chapter 8, verse 7, a very clear statement about man's inability to effectually dictate the timing of his own death.

It says in verse 7, Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come? No man has power over the wind to contain it, so no one has power over the day of his death. A very clear statement about man's inability and even wisdom's inability to

dictate the timing of one's own death. In chapter 8, verses 12 and 13, we find the same kind of thing.

Although the wicked man commits a hundred times, still lives a long life. I know that it will go better for a God-fearing man who is reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow again.

There is some confidence being stated there, but ultimately it is God who is in control of meting out judgment. And then in chapter 9, and verses 11 and 12, I have seen something else under the sun. The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise, or wealth to the brilliant, or favor to the learned, but time and chance happen to them all.

Again, ultimately it is God's sovereignty that dictates the timing of death. Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come, implying there the day of his death. As fish are caught in a cruel net and as birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.

You can be waking up one morning, and planning your routine. You might have great plans even for a particular day or for a particular period in your life, but the outcome of those things is certainly not guaranteed. No matter how wisely you might plan, and no matter how many ways in which you might plan for contingencies, God ultimately has one up on you.

He is the one who is able to determine the day of your death. And so, we find in these reflections man's inability and God's sovereignty for sure. We also find that Ecclesiastes suggests that death can be a foil against the quality of one's life, or by which the quality of life might be measured.

Again, adding is somewhat the, I don't think Ecclesiastes is necessarily a depressing, cynical, or negative book, but you do find some of these reflections tend to add an air of negativity to the book of Ecclesiastes. In chapter 4, verses 1-3, one of the reflections that Kohelet makes as he observes life under the sun is, again I looked and I saw the oppression that was taking place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter.

Power was on the side of their oppressors, and they had no comforter. In a hevel world, sometimes we see great injustices taking place. And I think of places like North Korea or places in the world today where oppression and corruption are the norm.

And it seems like one generation after another, after another, experiences this. They're born into a corrupt society, and they die within a corrupt society, and they suffer greatly. And it seems as if God is not present.

It seems as if sometimes God is not doing anything about it. I think about some of the prophets, the prophet Habakkuk, who said, Injustice, injustice, and violence, don't you see it, God? And eventually, God responds to Habakkuk and says, I will work and work in your days that you would not believe, though it were told to you I'm going to work beyond your wildest imagination. I've got a plan.

But Kohelet did not necessarily have that kind of conversation with God that we see in the prophet Habakkuk. Kohelet simply observes that there seems like, in this heavenly world, injustices are occurring, and there is great suffering, and God doesn't seem to be comforting. And this of course causes Kohelet some vexation.

And I declare that the dead, who have already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. It kind of makes me think of Job in chapter 3, where Job laments the day of his birth. He says it would have been better for me to be a stillborn child than to be suffering this kind of way in which I'm suffering.

In verse 3, Kohelet seems to echo the same, But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun. In other words, Kohelet seems to be framing things in such a way that he is saying that to live without some form of joy, to live without some form of satisfaction, is no way to live. And so, as a wise man, he is seeking to find and discover ways in which one might be able to extrapolate joy from this life lived in a fallen world.

But it certainly causes the wise man considerable angst to see that there are lives that are lived where there seems to be no joy, but rather only suffering. And so, a foil against which the quality of life is measured. Adding to this, we see that the inevitability of death is quite a motivation, it's a prod if you will, towards the enjoyment of life.

Now we'll be exploring the enjoyment of life in the next lecture as a prominent motif in the book of Ecclesiastes. Seven times the enjoy life refrain is repeated throughout the book. It begins early in the book in chapter 2 and extends out towards the end of the book in chapter 11.

It definitely seems to permeate the conversation of Ecclesiastes. And measured against the inevitability of death, one finds that death ought to motivate towards present experience. In other words, a wise man will take the proverbial bull by the horns and he will live life to its fullest.

He will seek to find satisfaction in the gifts that God gives, the kind of opportunities that God presents to even the fallen man, even fallen mankind in a heavily fallen world. And so, in any case we find various references to the inevitability of death in conjunction with the enjoyment of life. In chapter 2 and verse 24 we read, many of these texts we've read before, but again just to highlight the point, I can see nothing better for a man to do than eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work.

This too I see is from the hand of God, for without him who can eat or find an enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness, but to the sinner he gives up the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to one who pleases God, again hinting at the point that after him there is nothing that he can take with him. And so, this too is Hevel, a chasing after the wind. Throughout the enjoy life refrains, which we will each be investigating and reflecting upon in the next lecture, we find the inevitability of death to at least be hinted at if not to be explicitly stated.

As a matter of fact, probably the best example of the inevitability of death as a prompt and as a motivator for a present activity and experience is found in chapter 9 and verses 7-10. Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil.

In other words, look for opportunities to draw enjoyment from the present experience of life lived. Enjoy life with your wife whom you love, all the days of this hevel life that God has given you under the sun, all your hevel days, for this is your lot. I would suggest that this word, Helek, ought to be translated as allotment.

I take it in a very positive way and we'll explore that in the next lecture. For this is your allotment in life, and in your toilsome labor, not necessarily a negative thing, but it is your amal, work in a Hevel world under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.

For in the grave, Sheol, where you're going, and don't doubt that that's where you're heading, you're in that trajectory, there's neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. And so there again we find that Kohelet prompts the wise man to activity based upon the expectation that tomorrow is not guaranteed, the expectation that eventually we're heading to that place where none of these activities will be practiced. And you see that kind of motivation again in chapter 11.

Be happy, young man, while you are young, verse 9, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment. We'll explore the aspect of judgment here later on in the fear of God lecture, and I'll touch upon that a little bit more in this lecture as well.

So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are Hebel, they are passing. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and then you've got the allegory picturing the aging process. Recently, as we were videotaping this, the death of a very prominent figure occurred, Muhammad Ali.

And during that time when his life was being celebrated in media and on the television, I was viewing some of his older boxing matches from the golden age of heavyweight boxing from the 1960s and 70s. And you look at the young, vibrant Muhammad Ali, and it's just amazing, this man of such might and such power, who really, you know, called himself the greatest for sure, but, you know, in the boxing world, he was. I mean, he was the height of youth and vigor, I mean, he pictured everything that humankind might have in a healthy, young, vibrant individual.

And then, a few years later, in his early 40s, he's diagnosed with a terrible disease, Parkinson's disease, and then you start to see the downward spiral. He dies at 74 years of age, and you look at the pictures of him leading to those final years, and he's a shadow, a mere shadow of what his former self had been. It's a sad testimony to the heaviness of life.

And the truth is, no matter who you are, physically, mentally, even spiritually, we're all in this physical realm under the curse, heading in the same direction to the great. And Kohelet again ponders these things. In chapter 12, you see the imagery impressed upon the wise man concerning the aging process, and the prompt seems to be, to enjoy life while you can, and live life soberly in the fear of God because the inevitability of death is very much in the forefront of a wise man's thinking.

And this ought to prompt towards the enjoyment of life, and it ought to prompt towards the sobriety in life, towards remembering God. In other words, we'll find in a future lecture on the fear of God, many references to the reverence that is due to the sovereign God, but also, we find that the fear of God is motivated by an expectation of some form of future judgment. In chapter 12, for instance, the imperative, remember your creator in the days of your youth, very much a present motivation, but if you look at the very end of the book and the end of the chapter, you'll find that it is an expectation of some form of future judgment that seems to motivate Kohelet and a wise man towards sobriety in life.

Verse 13, now all has been heard, here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man, the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

This statement regarding every hidden thing seems to suggest, even if veiled and even without any kind of detail, some expectation that our wise man Kohelet has at an afterlife judgment. In other words, even when things might not necessarily be meted out properly in the present tense, there is an expectation that God will rectify things in an ultimate day of reckoning in the future tense. When will God bring every deed into judgment, whether it is good or evil? It seems to suggest that in the inevitability of death, there is also an expectation of some form of future judgment.

As a matter of fact, such seems to be quite clear in chapter 3 and verse 17. In the last lecture, I was dealing with the poem on time and the segment that I suggest begins with chapter 3 and verse 1 and concludes with chapter 3 and verse 17. A time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven, in verse 1, seems to be complemented in its closing by the statement, God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, and there will be a time for every activity and a time for every deed.

It seems like in all of the things that God orchestrates in this world, where he determines times, where he has actually built in suitable times, where he has provided cyclical occurrences for events to occur, where man might implement wisdom in the timing of things and know the appropriateness of the times. Nevertheless, there seems to sometimes be a lack of God's timing for judgment in this present experience. And yet, Kohelet seems to be resolved to the expectation that God will one day make things right, rectify wrongs, and that there will be a time for man to answer for the deeds that he has done.

And so, in the afterlife, there seems to be this expectation. It's veiled for sure, but it does seem to be pushing the envelope forward in Kohelet's theology of death and the inevitability of death.