

Dr. Al Fuhr, Ecclesiastes, Session 7

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In the introduction to the Book of Proverbs, the statement is made that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Now, for Kohelet, we find that the fear of God is the end of wisdom or the end of knowledge.

In other words, there's not necessarily a separation there. I think in some sense they're one and the same. The writer of Proverbs tells us that the fear of God, an orientation, a proper posture of reverence towards God, where God is instrumental, and a recognition or acknowledgment of God is instrumental in the decision-making that is taking place every day in the part of one of God's followers or on the part of a wise person, that orientation to God, that fear or reverence before God, that is the beginning of wise decision-making.

The wisdom of Kohelet does not find that fear of God has no place in wisdom. It's not such an overly pragmatic kind of wisdom that has no recognition of the authority of God as the one who rules all of life. As a matter of fact, the fear of God, as with the enjoyment of life, is very much integrated and integral to the theology and the wisdom of the book of Kohelet.

We find that the fear of God is an injunction, it's a commandment that is found not just exclusive to the epilogue, the ending of the book, although it's certainly highlighted there, but we also find it is integrated throughout the musings and the various literary points or literary components of the book of Ecclesiastes. In this lecture, what I would like to do is take some time to look at the fear of God as a prominent motif and tie together these motifs to a kind of comprehensive message that the book of Ecclesiastes leaves us with. The fear of God is very much a motif that highlights Kohelet's orthodoxy.

A lot of readers read the book of Ecclesiastes and think to themselves, well, this seems so out of line with the rest of scripture, but I think in doing so, they somewhat ignore these very plain statements that link wisdom to the fear of God. I would suggest to you that the fear of God is not again just a conclusion, but it's very much a component to the whole message of the book of Ecclesiastes. It's central to the message of Ecclesiastes.

Let's take a few minutes to look at some of these fear of God motif statements that we find in the book of Ecclesiastes. One that we've looked at earlier when we were looking at the poem on time is the fear of God that is thought to be necessary in light of the inability of man to know anything of his future and to recognize that there will be a time of reckoning in the future. In Ecclesiastes chapter 3 and verse 14, as I've stated before, the one place in scripture where I know there to be some kind of an

explanation as to why God does certain things the way that he does even when mankind might not understand is found in 3.14, and it is the fear, it's linked to the fear of God.

I know that everything God does will endure forever. Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men might revere him.

Yare is the Hebrew word here, fear him. Now this isn't some kind of a terror whereby mankind is crippled and unable to act, but rather it's kind of an orientation to God where mankind realizes that he's not the ultimate authority and control, but rather God is the authority and control, and that's very much fundamental to orthodox wisdom in the Old Testament and certainly to the message of Ecclesiastes. But it's not just that man is to fear God because he is not able to understand the ways of God or to have one up on God.

It's actually an expectation of final judgment that seems to also motivate Kohelet to his injunctions to fear God. In the verses that follow, whatever it has already has been and what will be has been before, and God will call the past into account, perhaps implying some sense of responsibility, a day of reckoning. Verse 16, And I saw something else under the sun.

In the place of judgment, wickedness was there. In the place of justice, wickedness was there. In other words, you find corruption in society where wickedness is in the place of the courtroom, in the place where justice ought to be found, in a place where God ought to be meting out judgment and justice.

Sometimes it seems as if people too often get away with it. So Kohelet then ponders, I thought in my heart, God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked and there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed. It's not just a matter of determined time here in the present.

It's just not a matter of appropriate time for man to act in the present. But God has a period of reckoning, a day of reckoning. And I think Kohelet as a wise man sees that there is not that kind of all-encompassing judgment that takes place in the present, so he expects it to occur in the future.

And I would suggest to you that in light of chapter 3 and verse 17 and especially chapter 12 and verses 13 and 14, where man individually, not Israel corporately, but man individually will give an account for the deeds that he has done, this implies that this eschatological judgment it's not something that is to be expected to be meted out against the nation or delivered to the nation in the manner of the prophets, but rather it is something that can be expected on the part of the individual. Again, really pushing the envelope forward so far as the theology of the afterlife and death is concerned in the Old Testament. In any case, implied within this expectation of

future judgment is the idea that man fears God not only because he is incapable of grasping the ways of God in the present, but also because he must account for his deeds in the future.

And so we see that in chapter 3 and verse 14, there is a hint towards the fear of God motif. We also see this in a more explicit way perhaps in Ecclesiastes chapter 5 verses 1 through 7. Now Ecclesiastes is not a book that is characterized by the cult of ancient Israel. In other words, you don't see a lot about sacrifice and the kind of things that were orchestrated and required by the Old Testament law.

You don't really find references to the priesthood and such or to the apparatus of religious festivities in ancient Israel, but it's not completely devoid of these kinds of things. As a matter of fact, at least in regard to a reverence before God, you do find some statements here regarding a wise man's posture before God and standing in awe of God. And so, in chapter 5 and verse 1, the text reads, Guard your steps when you go to the house of God, implying perhaps the temple here.

Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth. Perhaps linking the idea of the sacrifice of fools to being quick or speedy with one's mouth almost makes you think about offering up our posture of reverence and worship towards God in the here and now.

It's not that we necessarily go to God at a temple, but even as we speak words to God, kind of think of Romans chapter 12 and verses 1 and 2, I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of service, or as some translations would have it, a kind of reasonable worship or a right sense of worship. And so, it makes me think about the words that we speak as actually being a matter of worship and posture before God. And when we speak foolishly and we speak hastily, that kind of demonstrates our orientation, perhaps as one who is foolish.

Do not be quick with your mouth. Do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God, especially in a posture of worship. God is in heaven and you are on earth.

Remember that under the sun perspective. It's not necessarily a backslidden perspective, but in a theology of God and a theology of man, theological anthropology, there is a sense of separation between God and man. God is involved in the affairs of mankind, but he is wholly other.

He is different. And a wise man will recognize that and walk or set his steps in such a way that he walks in an acknowledgment of that difference. God is not just a buddy or a friend in Kohelet's theology.

God is wholly other. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words.

And so, we kind of see this cause-and-effect relationship in this proverbial statement here. So, the speech of a fool when there are many words. When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it.

So again, it's not necessarily representing all of the religious structure of ancient Israel here, but you do have this sense in which mankind might make vows before God and Kohelet recognizes this. And he says, do not delay. Do not be a fool.

Do not act haphazardly or irreverently towards God. Know who he is. He has no pleasure in fools.

Fulfill your vow. God is transcendent, but he's paying attention. And he does know when one acts foolishly.

You make a vow to God, you fulfill that vow quickly. Do not act the fool. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it.

A little tidbit of wisdom there as we would expect in a wisdom book. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. Makes you think of the book of Proverbs there and the many proverbs on being hasty with the mouth, with the words of one's mouth.

And do not protest to the temple messenger. My vow was a mistake. In other words, it's not a matter of doing it over when you're standing before a holy, righteous, and mighty God.

Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are hevel, therefore stand in awe of God. And so even within the heaviness of this fallen world, Kohelet seems to recognize that one's posture towards God is important. And when one bloats out words haphazardly and kind of acts as if God is just an afterthought or acts as if God is just some kind of a being that we can just, you know, kind of pile up with and not act reverently towards, Kohelet is very clear that person acts the part of the fool.

Knowing who God is, not necessarily trembling in some kind of fear that causes man to not be able to act in this world, but rather an accurate and a reverent posture before God, is something that is very much fundamental to the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. Therefore, stand in awe of God. A kind of imperative commandment here to remember your creator.

Moving beyond this, in chapter 11 and verse 9, we have a very clear statement regarding the fear of God. Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart in whatever your eyes see.

So, this is a part of the seventh and last enjoy life refrain. And again, the enjoyment of life and the fear of God are very much companions in the book of Ecclesiastes. Some would see them as almost polar opposites.

I would suggest to you that they really do work hand in hand or are quite compatible when you recognize that the fear of God is not some kind of asceticism and the enjoyment of life is not some kind of hedonism, but rather they complement one another when one recognizes that God gifts us with opportunities to joy and yet we live life in such a way that we don't enjoy sin but rather live reverently and soberly before God. Because in all of the enjoyment and the capacity to enjoy the gifts of God, know that for the things which we do, God will bring you to judgment. And so the expectation of judgment here seems to also be a catalyst towards the fear of God.

So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are fleeting or hevel, and then remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come. The inevitability of death acts as a kind of motivator for the fear of God. Again, it's not a kind of trembling in fear, but rather this is the right orientation and posture of reverence before God.

It motivates one to live soberly, taking into account the fact that we will answer for the deeds that we do. In chapter 12 and verses 13 and 14, certainly, one of the most critical segments on the fear of God motif is found in the conclusion to the whole matter. And so, in the epilogue to the book, the statement is made, now all has been heard, here is the conclusion of the matter.

Now, one might see the various enjoy life refrains as kind of leading to imperative, which would imply a kind of conclusion, an enjoy life conclusion, but again it's a two-sided wisdom coin. At the end of the book, in the epilogue, we find the statement made that the conclusion to the whole matter is that one should fear God, this is imperative once again, fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man. The NIV translates this, as the whole duty of man.

The phrase is actually quite ambiguous, it could be referring to the whole duty of man, in other words, this is the primary responsibility of man, or it could refer to the whole of man's activities, in other words, the fear of God ought to saturate all of the decisions that we make in all of the activities and choices that we undertake in this world. The truth is it could go either way and both would reflect the kind of wisdom

that we find in the book of Ecclesiastes. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil.

Now some scholars have come along to state that the fear of God injunction at the end of the book as a conclusion to the matter seems so foreign to the rest of the book of Ecclesiastes that one ought to recognize it as either the work of a later Orthodox redactor, somebody who comes along later and adds this to the text to kind of correct the rest of Kohelet's rather unorthodox statements, or it might be a kind of foil or corrective within the book itself where Kohelet kind of comes to his senses at the end of his life and says, hey I've explored everything I've looked into this, I've dabbled with a little bit of folly here and I've dabbled with a little bit of sin there and I've kind of come to realize that after all things are considered it's the fear of God that is essential. Now that might be right thinking. I mean there's certainly nothing wrong with that line of thinking.

I think we would be imposing some things upon the book of Ecclesiastes itself that the book itself doesn't bear out. For example, we've already looked at a few of these enjoy-life injunctions earlier in the book. Chapter 3 and verse 17 is very much integrated into the line of argument.

I see it as a part of that bracketing, that *inclusio* that begins with chapter 3 and verse 1 to simply suggest that chapter 3 and verse 17 was later inserted would seem a little bit odd, a little bit awkward there. Chapter 5 and verses 1 through 7 again seem to be very much integrated into the line of argument where one recognizes the separation between the divine and the mortal beings in a fallen world and so the due reverence that is given over to God by one who is wise a kind of wisdom theology in regards to reverence and proper posture before God, this is integrated into the rest of the book. Chapter 11 and verse 9 leading up to chapter 12 and verse 1 it is the enjoyment of life as a youth measured against or seen as a kind of companion to the fear of God in one's youth, knowing that tomorrow is not guaranteed.

Kohelet says to remember God now, don't put it off until you're an old man, until you're an old woman, acting as if you can just kind of get away with sin today and then kind of get right with God later before you die. You don't know if tomorrow is guaranteed to you. Remember God now.

You're going to answer for the deeds that you do in your 20s, your 30s and your 40s all the way up to the end of your life. You don't even know when that life will be cut off. You could be trapped in a cruel snare as Kohelet would say in chapter 9 and verses 11 and 12.

You don't know the end of your days. One thing that you do know is that you're heading towards, you're on a trajectory towards a day of reckoning, a day when you will answer before God for the deeds that you have done. So, remember God now.

Fear God now. In other words, in chapter 12 and verses 13 and 14, it's not acting as a corrective. It's not a kind of foil where the rest of the book is set straight.

It's very much in line with the theology of Kohelet all along. As a matter of fact, chapter 12 and verses 13 and 14 find great similarity with other passages such as 3:17, chapter 11 and verse 9, and chapter 12 and verse 1. It's interesting as well that the fear of God is a companion to this recognition of an impending time of judgment. Take a look back again at chapter 3 and verse 14 with me.

God does it so that man might revere or fear him. And then you see shortly after this expectation of judgment. In the place of judgment, wickedness was there.

And in the place of justice, wickedness was there. So Kohelet observes that in the present experience of man, there's corruption and there's injustice. The prophets certainly reflect that throughout many of the prophetic oracles.

They announce judgment against Israel and the leaders of Israel and Judah because of the injustice that's in the land. The book of Amos in particular, I think of when I think of social injustice and God's care for justice in the world and his desire to see justice in the world. But all too often we see in our experience and our observations that it seems like things are not rectified now.

And so Kohelet expects a future judgment. God will bring the judgment, both the righteous and the wicked. And there will be a time for every activity and a time for every deed.

By the way, notice this language. God will bring the judgment, both the righteous and the wicked. When you look at verse 14, you find that God will bring every deed into judgment, whether good or evil.

Again, it's not as if chapter 12 and verse 14 is standing on its own and there's nothing else in the book of Ecclesiastes that aligns with it. There will be a time of judgment. God will bring it to judgment in chapter 12 and verse 14 for God will bring every deed into judgment.

Makes you think of chapter 3 and verse 17 for sure. You also find in chapter 12 and verse 1 that the remember God imperative seems to be prompted by the expectation of judgment in chapter 11 and verse 9. For know that in all these things, God will bring you to judgment. By the way, you also find similarities in chapter 11 and verse 9 to chapter 12 and verses 13 and 14.

In verse 14, God will bring every deed into judgment. In chapter 11 and verse 9, follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all

these things, God will bring you to judgment. The comprehensiveness of judgment and what man will answer for, these things seem to align together between chapter 11 and chapter 12.

Again, to excise chapter 12 and verses 13 and 14 as a later edition, you would have to obviously do something of the same to chapter 11 and verse 9. And then chapter 12 and verses 13 and 14 again. Now all has been heard. Here's the conclusion of the matter.

Fear God. Keep his commandments. And why? Because every deed will be brought into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

Now this expectation of some kind of a future judgment, Ecclesiastes is not concrete on this. He definitely does not detail it. And many commentators say that there is nothing of a kind of future expectation of judgment in the book of Ecclesiastes.

However, many scholars do believe that Ecclesiastes is at least hinting at, however veiled and unsure, some expectation of future judgment. I would suggest by the statement, every hidden thing, that seems to suggest something that is not done in the present tense or the present experience of mankind in a heaven world, but rather it is something that can be experienced after this life is experienced, after death has occurred, and that again pushes open the envelope for what we read about in the New Testament concerning God's judgments. Now the book of Ecclesiastes has been explored regarding seven prominent motifs, if you consider the under the sun perspective to also be standing as a motif.

Some of these perhaps are more significant than others. Obviously, the hevelness of life needs to be understood properly. That's the dilemma, that's the problem, reflecting life's fallenness, linking Ecclesiastes back to the book of Genesis, and especially Genesis chapter 3. We find that the horizontal perspective is important.

We don't want to read too much into the thinking of Kohelet. He's not speaking as a systematic theologian. He's not privy to all the revelation knowledge that we have in the whole corpus of Scripture.

We don't have all 66 books having been revealed at this point in history to begin with. Kohelet wasn't reading the book of Revelation like you and I are. He did not know about the Bema Seat judgment in 2 Corinthians 5. He did not know about the great white throne judgment in Revelation.

Kohelet sees things from that horizontal and yet wise perspective. Remember, he's looking at things from wise eyes. He's exploring by the means of wisdom, by what all wisdom sages in the ancient Near Eastern world had at their capacity.

And he had excelled beyond any others in the ability to take wisdom and the precepts of wisdom and assess the world that he lived in by way of those precepts. He takes those precepts to his observations and experiences regarding life in a hevel world, and he explores to see whether or not there's any Yitrone, any solution to the dilemma of Hevel, any advantage or surplus, something which is left over after all things have been considered. And he discovers that there's none of that.

There's nothing that can really resolve the curse, the problem of the fallen world. There's nothing that in some way remedies death, the common experience of mankind. He did not have the Revelation knowledge of the Resurrection.

He did not know about Christ. The fact that where wisdom was unable to bring anything to the table to resolve the problem, the dilemma, or the dilemma of hevel, it was God himself who ultimately in redemptive history resolves the problem of Hevel. It's God himself who changes the course of history.

It's God himself who redeems this fallen world. What Kohelet was not able to find through wisdom, we do find through Christ. I think Romans chapter 8 especially bears that out when the Apostle Paul talks about the corruption of creation and the redemption that awaits the saints.

In any case, back to the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. Where Ecclesiastes is unable to, where Kohelet is unable to find Yitrone, he does find what wisdom is able to do. Wisdom is able to provide tov.

Wisdom is able to provide something which is better. It's better to live life in this fallen world no matter how uncertain and short our years may be. As a wise person rather than as a fool, there will be regular advantages to applying wisdom to one's decisions in life.

A proper orientation to God is a part of that package. Making timely decisions is a part of that package. Knowing the appropriateness of the times is a part of that package.

Recognizing one's status over and against God is part of that package. Being able to handle and deal with the problems of life in an appropriate manner. Hedging one's bets.

Taking risks in life. When you read the Proverbs of chapter 7, chapter 10, and chapter 11, one finds that Kohelet is extremely pragmatic. As a matter of fact, even a non-believer, if they were to put into practice the kind of principles and precepts that one finds in the proverbial wisdom of Ecclesiastes, they would more likely find success in life than one who was not applying these things into the decision making and the scheme of things as they live out their years.

And so, in that sense, the book of Ecclesiastes is very practical. But Kohelet goes beyond this. He's also grappling with some of the theological hard points or questions of life lived in a fallen world.

What about the kind of issues that Job deals with? A defense of the justice of God. What kind of sense does man make of these things that seem so unsensible and so unjust in this world? Kohelet doesn't necessarily give us a clear answer explaining all the details of why God does things. Much like in Job, Job never knows the answer.

But Kohelet tells us that God does do these things so that man might fear him. So certainly, there is an advantage for man, a wise man, to understand that. To live in sobriety again knowing that he will answer for the deeds that he does.

In light of the inevitability of death, Kohelet recognizes that the wise man not only to find success in life must apply wisdom but the wise man also must recognize the gifts that God gives us, the allotments that he provides in order to be able to receive graces from God to find joy in this present context of life and experience. And so Kohelet is very, very adamant that the wise will enjoy life as a gift from God, taking advantage of every opportunity, not putting off until tomorrow what can be done today because tomorrow might not be guaranteed to you. I think even in my own life those things that I most regret are things that I did not do because I put them off and put them off and put them off.

And I'm only in my mid-40s. You talk to somebody who is in their 70s, 80s, or 90s, maybe towards the end of their life, and they'll tell you it's not so much what I did, although sometimes of course we do think that we regret, but it's more often than not those things which I did not do that today I regret because I'm not going to have the opportunity to do them over or to do them again. And so Kohelet is a wise man who encourages experience in the present, to live out life with present possibilities, all the while recognizing God's providence in the outcome.

And so, this idea of providential probabilities, a wisdom of probabilistic opportunity, seems to be very much a part of the message of Ecclesiastes. But in living out life to its fullest and enjoying life, the simcha that God provides for us, and finding those opportunities for achievement, not just for the sake of achievement, but rather for the sake of finding God's grace in life, even in the midst of all those things, that is not to suggest that man should not live in the fear of God. And so, this idea of the two-sided wisdom coin, the young especially, will enjoy life as a gift from God, making the most of every opportunity, but they'll live soberly, live in recognition and reverence that there is a God that they must answer to one day.

This is such practical wisdom, so pragmatic and paradigmatic. Think about teaching this kind of material to a youth group setting, to young people, in their teens, late

teens, maybe early twenties, who have their whole life potentially in front of them. To these, if they will grasp this idea that life doesn't have to be an either-or proposition, it's just not a matter of either living life to enjoy it or fearing God, perhaps giving up the enjoyment of life.

No, no, no. That's not the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. But rather it's the idea that a wise person will grasp life to its fullest, all the while recognizing who is really over them.

A proper posture and orientation to God dictates the way that we make decisions in life. In the book of Proverbs, that fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. In the book of Ecclesiastes, it's that fear of God that is the end of wisdom.

Whichever side of wisdom we look at this from, the beginning of or the end of, it's the fear of God that ties wisdom together. The book of Ecclesiastes in that sense is very much in line with the rest of Scripture.