

Dr. Elaine Phillips, OT History, Lit., and Theology, Lecture 26

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This is Dr. Elaine Phillips in her Old Testament History, Literature and Theology course, lecture number 26

Good morning, and the peace of Christ are with you. Everybody got their paper done? I've already gotten a number of them via emails, 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 did it come from? Where was this song was based? Beyond that and we'll have it. [singing]

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 business, 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, and 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 that you would 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. Got 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 a 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. Because when we deal with those particularly, 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 praise the Lord and he's saved and delivered us from our sins. Why is it there?

Rebecca. (Student answers)

I'm sorry say it again.

(Student answers)

Oh, it's not a rhetorical question. That's a good question. Yes, I'm actually looking for an answer.

(Student answers)

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, pessimistic, you know, all those kinds of nasty things.

Cassia. (Student answers)

Okay, it brings everything together, puts life in perspective, and 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 towards that in a moment. Does anybody know what 12:12 says? The second half of the verse? That'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." 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, evanesce 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*. Say it, *hebel*. Especially with that "h" in the beginning of it. Alright, 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 an unfortunate, I would suggest, they are an imposition of meaning on to the word, because as I note for you here, the word itself, simply means "breath" or "vapor." That's what it means. And we'll say a little bit more about that in a moment. It might help us, and in some time I would encourage you to sit down and read the book of Ecclesiastes and every one of the thirty-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 thirty 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. Well 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*. "*Hebel, 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 this direction within the last thirty 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 it's Hebrew meaning implies, i.e. "breath" and "vapor," then there's 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's 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 not up here, I don't think. When we read the story of Cain and Abel, back in Genesis 4, I mean we read it in English as Cain and Abel. Do you know what Abel's name is in Hebrew? *Hebel*. 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 *Hebel's* life, we see this kind of frustration that death cuts way too short, something that is utterly valuable, and that is human life.

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're 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 and 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, and 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 Qohelet as he, that's the name of the author, as he 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 Ecclesiastes chapter 1, it's got Genesis 3 in mind. What happens in Genesis 3? The curse on the ground as the result of the fall, the fact that things are now going to be toil and labor and pain and anguish, that's being kind of mirrored and echoed in the first chapter of 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, "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 Cassia said a moment ago, it's a reality check. It's how we all have to live.

Continuing on, "chasing after 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 1 verses 5 and 6. "The sun rises, the sun sets, hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the north, then to the south." 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 and do it if you want an interesting exercise. But it's the elusive, it's elusive, it's transient, and that's probably what's being gotten at here. All these things 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. 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 forbid, please don't quote me. I hope nobody here is writing for the Tartan.

Anyway, never mind, let's get off the Tartan. Which of course, leads us right onto what profit or what good, doesn't it? Sorry, this is getting worse. I didn't plan that. Another, very fascinating phrase that shows up repeatedly, what profit is 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 lie in all these pursuits?

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 and the next line, either a synthetic or a synonymous or an antithetical reflection. I'm going to suggest in the poetry in 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 the things that we can enjoy. And in 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, or think that way, or deal with my anxieties that way and I bet you don't either, if you're honest. And the book is saying to us, when we step back and get to this perspective where we recognize, God has given these things as gifts. 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 the heavenly perspective imparts the possibility that

we might look at it that way. Any questions?

Yeah, Sarah. (Student answers)

Yeah, 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 a real quick, as usual. The word "heaven" simply means "sky." One of its meanings is simply "sky." On the other hand, when Solomon, for example, is praying his prayer, he's talking about the heavens 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. Second point is, 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, as Paul talks about the third level of heaven, in 2 Corinthians 12, and, you know that's linked right in with 2 Enoch and some of that intertestamental background. 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, on that "under the heavens," simply to translate it as a parallel to "under the sun," "under the sky." Since *shamayim* means sky as well as heaven. Coming back to my 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. "A son of David, king in Jerusalem," which could refer to Solomon. We'll 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 Qohelet'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, we're going to return to them in a moment. "All's 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, 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 the structure of it, 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 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, in one of, probably the most poignant poems in all of Scripture, chapter 12 verses 1 through 7. "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 disillusion of the human body in old age right before you die. And so this person can’t see any more. Can’t hear 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.

Then 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 broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground from which it came.” Genesis, all over again, chapter 3. 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 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, recognizing 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 5, 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 mentioned as well, the importance of repetitions. He doesn’t just say the whole thing once. He keeps coming back to the fact that there’s work, that’s

toil and labor, but it's a gift of God. There's work, you work for your money, 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 as well, as we live in this world with the kinds of things that are a 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 *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 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. There's an evolution of thought.

And I would suggest 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 is *ra*, simply means evil, that which is bad. It means evil.

The other thing that's very interesting and paradoxical, having said all that, and 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, that even have some funny aspects to it, that are 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. You know, 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 that have the gift of a sense of humor are blessed in that way.

All right, do you get some sort of a sense of the structure here? There are different structural things that are a part of this: framework, repetitions, conceptual developments, and then also an ongoing, I would say, maturing of his thought and perceptions.

Well, having said all that, who wrote this book anyway? How many of you think it was Solomon?

Why? Susanna, why? (Student answers)

"Son of David, king of Jerusalem," perhaps, right. And certainly you know when you read chapter 2, it sounds like Solomon, he gets a harem, he builds all sorts of things, sounds like Solomon possibly,

Yes, Nick? [student response]

Yes, he certainly has a sense of wisdom and of course that's one of our big W's that we associate with Solomon and this is somebody who is pursuing wisdom, this Qohelet guy. *Qahal* is a Hebrew word which means "congregation" and so a Qohelet is somebody who "addresses a congregation," apparently. So some of your translations are going to call him "teacher," some 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 Qohelet is a feminine form of a noun. Just for kicks. "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, alright?

Great wisdom, great wealth, great building projects. Lifestyle sounds like Solomon, and verse 9 says, this is our third person epilogue, “he set in order many proverbs,” well how many proverbs did Solomon write? Do you remember? 3000, right. So it certainly sounds like Solomon.

Now let me just, you know, 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 but there are those who suggest that 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 Qohelet? I don't have an answer for that, I'm just sort of laying it out there for you because again, if we've got somebody who is, *was*, king of Israel, why label himself Qohelet, one who addresses the congregation either as a teacher or a preacher? It's an interesting issue and 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 so 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: Qohelet 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. That’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 is 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. Qohelet’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*. Its 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 the point of death. So just these four things that are kind of categories in which we can’t 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 retire. *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 26-28, Qohelet has had it with women, now you might understand why if this is Solomon because 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 its 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 will do it sometime but that’s a sidetrack. Mortality, death is inevitable, issue of uncertainty. All this stuff keeps bothering us, so this is a crisis, this is an existential crisis.

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, its not an exhaustive listing, the injustice is pretty clear in chapter 5 as well, chapter 8 too. Remember our conceptual parallelism. That's the human crisis.

But we also have the counterpoint, what God has given. 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, in 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 this poem--I'm not going to pick it 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 interesting things, there's stability there, time for this, a time for that, and those are counterpoints but don't think that they're predictable counterpoints. It's not like that which is good always mentioned first and that which is bad is always mentioned last. There's places where they are turned around a little bit. So even with the stability that we have and 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, *yafay*, nice, beautiful in its time.

He's set eternity in the hearts of humankind, well that's something that's really profoundly meaningful, we have that compulsion in us to know beyond what can know and to seek for beyond what we can have and to strive for knowing God. He's 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 the beginning to end, which is just as well.

But God has given these things, which are tremendous gifts. He's given enjoyment. The author of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet, enjoys life, he tells us to as well,

Yes, there have been some real vexatious things, but there's also some things to enjoy and he has certainly enjoyed getting to know a lot, he enjoyed work and pleasure even after he says that they are *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 7 with that bitterness that comes though in chapter 7 and instead look at verses 9-12 of chapter 4. "Two are better than one if one falls down, the his friend can help him up, if two lie down together they will keep warm. Though one may be over powered, two can defend themselves." It's good to have somebody to be with for all these different reasons. Relationship are important and Qohelet recognizes that and recognizes that they are gifts from God.

And 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 all things to judgment" and you're thinking 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 its going to be a perfect judgment and of course, its going to re-establish *shalom*, which, if you had been here last year for our convocation theme you would know, is the right order of things.

Alright, any questions before we move on to I think our next thing is Song of Songs, yes. Any questions on Ecclesiastes before we move onto Song of Songs? I know I've done this really, really fast. I'm aware of that, but we have to do it 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 like heavens of the heavens, song of songs. Song of songs means "the best song." It's a way of saying the superlative--the best song. And interestingly enough if you've read Dr. Wilson on this stuff that you're supposed to read, you're aware that these 5 little books; Song of Songs is one of them. They are towards the end of the Hebrew Bible. They're called the 5 *megillot*--the 5 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 its April, what 20th? No, it'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 Suzanna [student response].

That's one way of reading it, that indeed this is a figure, let's call it that, of God's love for Israel. And from a New Testament perspective, Christ's love for the church. That's one of the ways, in fact for centuries, 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, Mount Sinai, those 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? And 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. 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 supposed Israelites and Jews were always reading this? Maybe they had been for a long time, by the way, because there are some early Rabbinic interpreters who read it exactly that way. Most notably because, I think it's in chapter 2 where it talks about "my dove who was 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 Egypt connection.

Why else might this bet 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 it focus on, that study? [student response] Yeah, and sexuality, right? And Song of Song is not ashamed of that issue and that topic and those expressions. Song of songs is a celebration of human sexuality.

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 get on with 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, 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 the 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 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, cultic, context you expressed love for the deity and of course, basically what's this saying? It's saying that Israel is 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. These are exquisite love poetry. And we're going to talk about the characteristics of that in a moment. It 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 hint in terms of symbolizing in some ways the relationship between God and his people.

What we do want to keep in mind as we read this book is that the garden is very important. End of chapter 4 going into chapter 5, little bit more in chapter 6. In other words, pretty centrally located in the book is the garden, which is at first locked, guarded. Gardens back then had walls around them Okay? Representative of the young woman's virginity, and then the lover is allowed into the garden. Very clear sexual overtones in the imagery that's there but the key there is that it's hidden, its protected, what else do I say? Hidden, protected, and intimate, and sensuous.

Again, start reading with, I think its chapter 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 were supposed to be thinking of Adam and Eve and 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's 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 is 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, were going to come back to why that is probably the case later on. Are we good so far? Alright.

Well ok, 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. I'm, going to show you a little picture in a moment to look at some of that imagery. But you know 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 wind in 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, choice foods, notably the honey, the milk, the 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 got to know where those are? Notice even the Song of Songs however is located in a place and is drawing on the imagery that people would know, En Gedi, that’s in the Song of Songs, places that people know.

And of course, emphasis on 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 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 and then of course, the tower as well. You know towers are not just towers, towers are there because they are security installations. That’s important. Well, here is our imagery and we’re not going to spend lots of time—probably in the back you can’t even read this—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 beasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.” “Your lips drip honey,” well that’s not exactly very nice, does it? Ok? And so forth and so on. Don’t need to spend much time—Oh, the pomegranate! Don’t forget the 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? It might be a big part of it. But maybe there’s something else going on as well? No question. This is 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 and this is something that’s been suggested by a guy named George Schwab and I think he’s really into something here. This book is focusing on intimacy, privacy, in terms of this wonderful sexual expression and that may be intended as a polemic. What’s a polemic? Got to define our word here. What’s a polemic? [student response] Yes, it’s basically an argument against. It comes from a Greek word that 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. You know, 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 and all that. The suggestion is that maybe this book is intended to privatize. Probably I 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 that there is no ritual language in it. You know, making sure there’s no connections between what’s going on in this celebration of human, intimate, wonderful, love gift of God and appeal 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 kinds 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 song where things get a little bit tenuous as the beloved is feeling that her lover isn't there. She's seeking for him; there's other people that come in the watchmen the second time around are a little bit of a problem. Alright? So there are some threats that are opposed 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 you know 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 just read that last passage for you and then we'll stop. "Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as a grave, it burns like a blazing fire like a mighty flame" or "the flame of Ya," maybe, "many waters cannot quench love rivers can't wash it away, if one were to give all of the wealth in his house for love, it would be utterly scorned."

Alright, we need to stop with that because its 10 past and its Friday.
Shabbat shalom.

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