

Dr. Al Fuhr, Ecclesiastes, Session 3

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Beyond the familiarity that most people have with the Hevel concept, the vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, a wording that we're so familiar with in the book of Ecclesiastes, another stock phrase that we tend to associate uniquely with the book of Ecclesiastes is under the sun. In the Hebrew, this would be *tahat ha-shemesh*. It would be the idea of a perspective by which our Kohelet, our Solomonic figure, our wise sage of Ecclesiastes, is taking in his quest to find this *yitron*, the solution to the dilemma of Hevel.

Now, it's very common in popular teaching and preaching to associate with the under the sun phraseology the idea that Solomon or Kohelet's perspective was in some way backslidden or ungodly or humanistic, maybe even hedonistic. There are a lot of folks out there who will associate the under the sun perspective as being man's perspective as opposed to the under the heavens perspective or under heaven perspective being that perspective from God. I would suggest to you that the under the sun perspective by which Kohelet undertakes his journey, his quest to find *Yitron*, is simply nothing more than a matter of perspective that comes from living life on this planet.

In a Hevel world, not necessarily looking at life from heaven downward vertically, but rather looking at life from a horizontal perspective. Not a backslidden perspective, certainly not an unwise perspective. As a matter of fact, one of the things that we'll see here in this lecture is that Kohelet undertakes his journey through the lens of wisdom.

He observes and experiences life and he filters that through wisdom. It's not a humanistic kind of wisdom, it is a God-centered wisdom, but it is not divinely inspired in the sense that it's not revelatory. Now again, that's not to suggest that the book of Ecclesiastes isn't inspired, but the perspective by which Kohelet undertakes his journey is simply horizontal.

He's looking at life from a limited perspective, from the perspective of man. He's observing life with everything that he had at his capacity by which he might be able to apply wisdom and understand it. Now looking at the phrase under the sun, we see it repeated 29 times in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Again, in various contexts and with association to other motifs. One of the things, as I suggested, however, is that there is a companion or at least an alternative phrase that you'll see periodically popping up in the book of Ecclesiastes and that is *tahat ha-shemayim*. And that is the "under the heavens" perspective, which I would suggest to you is nothing more than a literary alternative.

There's no theological division between the under the heavens and the under the sun perspective. As a matter of fact, we can quickly survey some of these under the heavens perspectives or phrases that we find in Ecclesiastes. It would be a bit much to look at each one of the under the sun phrases in the book of Ecclesiastes at least as we explore the motif.

In any case, if you'll open your Bibles if you have them as you view this video and take a look with me at chapter 1 and verse 13. We'll see one of our first examples of what is done under heaven or the under the heaven phrase. As a matter of fact, we see this in part of the autobiographical introduction.

I, the Kohelet, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. Now again, it's not a matter of Kohelet at this point observing things top-down vertically from the heavens and having a kind of revelatory viewpoint that maybe the prophets would have brought with them.

He's simply observing life as a wise sage. We would suggest that in the book of Ecclesiastes, we're dealing with inspired literature but the Kohelet here is simply applying wisdom through the lenses that he had available to observe life in this fallen world. We can also see the same kind of phraseology in chapter 3 and verse 1. In introducing the poem on time, the introduction states, There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven.

Now some might suggest, well then what follows is an application of God's activity because it's under heaven. But I would suggest to you that if our understanding of the time or the poem on time is that it's dealing with the appropriateness of timing applied by a wise man in this world, then really this under the heaven phraseology is nothing different than a variant to the under the sun perspective that we see so commonly in the book of Ecclesiastes. But to really clinch this point that there's no distinctive or theological difference between life lived under the sun versus under heaven, take a look at chapter 2 and verse 3. Chapter 2 and verse 3, again part of the autobiographical statement of Ecclesiastes, I tried, that is Kohelet tried, cheering myself with wine and embracing folly.

My mind still guiding me with wisdom, a little paradoxical there for sure but we'll get to that later. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. Again, if there is something distinctive from the under the sun perspective on activity that we see elsewhere in the book of Ecclesiastes, it would seem to be negated by the use of this phrase within the context of worthwhile activity for men to do in the heavily days, the fleeting days of their lives.

So again, a matter of perspective, Kohelet has undertaken his journey to find a solution to the dilemma of Hevel through the lens of wisdom but from an under the sun perspective. It's simply a horizontal perspective, it's not a backslidden perspective, it's not a worldly perspective, and he's not a practicing idolater as he undertakes this journey. Now onto the issue of wisdom.

Wisdom takes on the role of motif in the book of Ecclesiastes but it also takes on a matter of perspective. And as I mentioned in our introduction, wisdom is also the genre by which we would apply the studies to the book of Ecclesiastes. In other words, it's wisdom literature and so we're going to use the rules of engagement that are appropriate to study in wisdom literature as we study the book of Ecclesiastes.

But first to deal with this as a matter of perspective. Was our Kohelet undertaken his quest through some kind of ulterior, hedonistic kind of approach or was he indeed looking through the lens of wisdom as he explores by activity and by reflection all of these things which we see in the book of Ecclesiastes? I would suggest to you that the text itself affirms that the quest, the journey is undertaken through wisdom.

To just take a look at a few examples of this, again we just read in chapter 1 and verse 12 a few minutes ago the beginning of the autobiographical segment here. I the Kohelet was king over Israel and Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

Just scrolling down a few lines here, you can see the same kind of terminology in verse 16. I thought to myself, look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me. I've experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.

And then in verse 17, then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom. And so what we find here in Ecclesiastes is that Kohelet aims at being wise. He also began his journey, proceeded by wisdom, but he even applied himself through wisdom to gain all the more wisdom.

But also, we find here that he wants to find if there's any solution, anything that he might have the capacity to bring to the table in this journey. So, he also seeks after the potential in madness and folly. And I learned that this too is a chasing after the wind.

Again, we saw that in a companion to the Hevel phrase in our second lecture. Other verses that seem to affirm Kohelet's wisdom throughout, in chapter 2 in verse 3, I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly, my mind still guiding me with wisdom. And then if you scroll down a little ways after his autobiographical testimony of all the things that he was able to amass and gain and the utility of all

the things that he had as he was able to apply them to the quest for our yitron, our gain, our surplus, our advantage.

He says in verse 9, I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this, my wisdom stayed with me. My point is simply this, nowhere in the book of Ecclesiastes do we find Kohelet ever stating that he is anything less than well-equipped and wise to undertake the journey to find the quest, or to find the thing of yitron, to find this thing that is a solution to the dilemma of life's fallen conditions.

As a matter of fact, in the epilogue at the end of the book, you find the same affirmation of Kohelet's wisdom. In chapter 12 and verse 9, not only was the teacher wise, he also imparted knowledge to the people. So, he gathered wisdom, but he also taught wisdom.

The words of the teacher in verse 10 are upright and true. So, the text itself testifies to the accuracy and the wisdom in the language, in the words, in the concepts that are conveyed throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. But it's not just a matter of perspective.

It's not just that Kohelet undertakes the journey through wise eyes and explores these things through the lens of wisdom. He explores the value of wisdom. In other words, he's going to find if wisdom itself brings anything to provide solutions to the dilemma of Hevel.

Can wisdom provide the yitron that he seeks after? As a matter of fact, what we find in Ecclesiastes is that there's kind of some tension there in Kohelet's assessment of wisdom. He finds that wisdom is very profitable. It's tov, it's good.

And it provides an advantage in this world. It's better to be wise than to be a fool. But we also find that wisdom is limited in its capacity to ultimately bring that resolution to the problem of Hevel.

What he's going to find is that the wise man is subject to death just as the fool. He's going to find that the wise man is subject to some of the mysteries of God's activity on earth just as much as the fool. As I mentioned before, many of the Hevel judgments that Kohelet mentions.

For instance, the righteous getting what the wicked deserve and the wicked getting what the righteous deserve. It certainly seems like that is out of line with what we would expect for a world governed by God. And yet you find sometimes things that are really expected of the fool to happen to the wise.

A person can make all the right decisions in the world. They can make the right choices. They can hedge their bets.

They can do everything that seems appropriate. Even their timing is right and yet some unexpected tragedy occurs, some unexpected event and everything goes kablooey. In other words, man cannot, even through the application of wisdom, do anything to guarantee the outcome of such and such an effort.

And our wise man, Kohelet, observes that wisdom, while it is good, while it definitely provides an advantage, ultimately it does not provide guarantees. We see that kind of principle in the book of Proverbs. In the book of Proverbs, if you were to actually apply the precepts that one finds in the book of Proverbs to life and to do so consistently, the expectation would be that your life would turn out much better than.

And yet we all know that the example that I love to give is somebody who is fit, who pursues physical fitness, who does things to train their body, they eat right, they exercise, they do everything that is appropriate to live a healthy long life. And yet we all know that sometimes things happen that take the marathon runner out of the picture. They get run over by a car, right? Or maybe we know somebody who has been diagnosed with cancer, even though they are the kind of person who is eating right, eating appropriately, exercising, and doing all the things right to live a long and healthy life.

And yet at the same time, I think Kohelet would say, I've known a man, I've known a woman who ate all this good food, they exercised, they did everything right, and yet they were cut off from the land by cancer, but it would be better for you to eat right and to exercise and to not eat donuts every day and to not sit on the couch and just watch reruns. It's better to be active. In other words, wisdom tells us what the probable outcome is.

It doesn't guarantee the future. Kohelet is quite vexed by the fact that wisdom cannot guarantee the future. That's kind of at the core of many of the reflections that Kohelet brings within the book of Ecclesiastes concerning wisdom.

Nevertheless, he affirms the value of wisdom, the value of making the right choices in life. To just take a look at a few examples of wisdom on both sides, the negative and the positive. Chapter 2 and verses 14 through 16 provide some glimpses of this.

Chapter 2 and verse, actually we could go ahead and begin with verse 12. Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done? I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness.

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. In other words, death is the leveler of all things.

The rich and the poor, the wise and the fool, all two must die. Then I thought in my heart, the fate of the fool will overtake me also. So Kohelet, the one who has grown greater in wisdom than any who had gone before him, realizes that he too must die.

Then what do I gain by being wise? I said in my heart, this too is hell, perhaps pointing to the vanity of the pursuit. In other words, wisdom itself is ultimately unable to provide any lasting solutions. For the wise man, like the fool, will not long be remembered.

In days to come, both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die. Yet in other places within the book of Ecclesiastes, we find that wisdom is affirmed, the value of wisdom is affirmed.

For instance, take a look at chapter 4 and verses 13 through 16. Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take a warning. The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, for he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom.

I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. There was no end to all the people who were before him, but those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is hell, a chasing after the wind.

So, the wise youth was able to gain advancement in the world that Kohelet reflects upon, but ultimately that youth's wisdom did not provide any kind of lasting solution. There was profit, but not that kind of overwhelming solution, that Yitron idea that Kohelet is searching for. You'll actually find in the book of Ecclesiastes many proverbs that reflect upon probabilistic outcomes, things that would provide an advantage for the application of wisdom in the present sense or in the present age.

For instance, I love some of the proverbs in chapter 11. And I read in our introduction through a few of these. Verse 1 of chapter 11, Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.

In other words, you have to kind of step out there and sometimes take risks in life, in investments, and whatever the pursuits of life might be that you would apply such wisdom towards. Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land. In other words, hedge your bets.

Not everything will succeed necessarily, but you don't know the future. You don't know what kind of things might succeed and what kind of things might falter. So, in life, as you take advantage of the opportunities that God might give you, you might have to apply yourself to multiple pursuits.

Don't put all your eggs in one basket, as the modern proverb would suggest. If clouds are full of water, they pour rain on the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there it will lie.

The idea of taking advantage when conditions are right. As a matter of fact, I think some of the appropriateness of timing is reflected throughout the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. And so, a wise man knows when the time is to act and knows when the time is to refrain.

And so, without a guarantee of the future, one must apply such wisdom and timing to the various occurrences and the various opportunities that one has in life. Whoever watches the wind will not plant, whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. In other words, if you always wait for perfect conditions, you might never have any opportunity to find success in life.

When I think about situations that many of my college students must be facing. Is it the right time to ask that girl out? Well, it might be that if you never ask that girl out, or if you never ask any girl out, you'll probably find yourself never going on a date, you'll find yourself never being married. On the flip side, if you always turn that guy down because it might seem like it's too risky, well, then you might find yourself never going on that date.

Or if you're talking about maybe stepping out in a business venture. You know, if you're always waiting for the perfect timing to occur or the perfect conditions to occur, then you might find that the time never comes when those perfect conditions line up. And you might find yourself never moving forward and never succeeding or finding success in life in those various ventures.

And so, the wisdom of Ecclesiastes suggests that risk-taking is important. This is the application of probabilistic wisdom. Kohelet realizes that he's not able to guarantee the future.

There are things that are simply out of his control. Even as he has expanded and grown in wisdom more than any who have proceeded before him. But he also recognizes that in a life that is chaotic, in a life that is hevel, a wise man will nevertheless hedge his bets and move forward to the best of his ability.

Chapter 11 and verse 5 continue on with this. As you do not know the path of the wind or how the body is formed in the mother's womb, so you cannot understand

the work of God, the maker of all things. In other words, a wise man is never going to have one up on God.

He's never going to be able to figure out why God does things in his own time. He's never going to be able to kind of understand the future in such a capacity, in such a way that he's able to make all of the right decisions all of the time. As a matter of fact, I think the book of Ecclesiastes would suggest that if a person were able to do that, they could become a billionaire in a couple of weeks.

Why? Because they could just pick the right stocks. They could just pick the right kind of investments to be able to make millions and even billions within a short period of time. But the bottom line is even the wisest stock picker, even the wisest business capitalist, even the wisest person who takes the greatest risk in life, they still don't know the future.

So, they're simply hedging bets, trying to move forward to the best of their ability, but they'll never have one up on God. And so some of these Proverbs in chapter 11 on risk-taking conclude with verse 6. Sow your seed in the morning, and in the evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know what will succeed. Whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.

Again, a wise man must recognize that we're looking for probabilistic outcomes. I like to call this providential probabilities. In other words, Kohelet recognizes that all things are ultimately within the hand of God, including the application of wisdom.

In other words, you make all the right choices, but ultimately it's God who is going to bring about the outcome. And so, we venture forward through a recognition that all things ultimately are in the hand of God, and yet we do move forward. The application of providential probabilities all under the providence of God.

So in other words, what we find here is that wisdom takes on a kind of motif in the book of Ecclesiastes where Kohelet explores the issues of life not only through the lens of wisdom, but also explores whether or not there's anything that wisdom is able to bring to the table first to gain nitron, the solution to the dilemma of life's fallen condition, but secondarily to find whether or not wisdom provides toad, any temporary advantage or anything good for man living or navigating life in this fallen world. And then lastly, we find that Ecclesiastes is studied as wisdom literature. As I mentioned in the introduction, we're going to find Proverbs within the book of Ecclesiastes, reflection speeches, we're going to find the kind of example stories where the wise sage is going to wrestle with a kind of storyline and extrapolate a lesson, a wisdom-based principle or precept from that storyline.

And so, with all of that in mind, we as a reader need to understand that the way in which we approach the book of Ecclesiastes needs to take into account what it is as a

part of the wisdom corpus of the Old Testament. In other words, in Ecclesiastes, we're not going to read it as we would a narrative text, we're not going to read it as a prophetic text, we're not going to see thus saith the Lord in the book of Ecclesiastes, and so we're not going to have a problem with that horizontal under the sun perspective. We're not going to expect to find a kind of prophetic oracle where God necessarily proclaims the future or anything like that.

It's just simply not the way the book of Ecclesiastes is designed. It's not a part of what God is doing through this book in his scripture. We also find that in Ecclesiastes, some of the hermeneutical guidelines that we follow, for instance, looking for the practical side of lessons, is very, very important, very valuable.

In other words, just like in the book of Proverbs, which is kind of the quintessential wisdom literature of the Old Testament, we too expect in the book of Ecclesiastes to find principles that might be applied to the practical side of life. And so even in going through chapter 11 and verses 1 through 6, we saw some examples of that. Let me take you to a few more examples in chapter 7 and in chapter 10.

Perhaps we can begin with chapter 10 and verses 8 through 10. I'm reading out of the NIV. Ecclesiastes chapter 10 in verse 8 reads, Whoever digs a pit may fall into it.

Whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake. Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them. Whoever splits logs may be endangered by them.

And so, the reader reads this and thinks to themselves, what in the world is that talking about? I mean, is Kohelet really that concerned about pits and snakes and stones and logs? Or is there really some kind of a wisdom-based lesson behind this? I would suggest that the rather interpretive translation of the New Living Translation is actually quite on point here. Now, I'm holding before me a 1996 edition of the NLT, and it has been changed and revised since then. But in the 96 version, I do think it's somewhat informative to see how they translate verses 8 and 9. When you dig a well, you may fall in.

When you demolish an old wall, you could be bitten by a snake. When you work in a quarry, stones may fall and crush you. When you chop wood, there is a danger with every stroke of your axe.

And then this line, such are the risks of life. That's not actually in the Hebrew text. That's actually very interpretive.

But I think it's actually on target here. I think the point is that you've got to take risks in life to see anything accomplished. As a matter of fact, following up with that are precepts on how to perhaps not only take risks in life, but actually to find success in taking those risks.

Verse 10 reads, Since a dull axe requires great strength, sharpen the blade. In other words, it's not just a matter of taking risks. It's not just a matter of swinging the axe.

It's not just a matter of working hard and taking risks, but also working smart and taking risks. In that, you will find success. As a matter of fact, the text here, again, it's an interpretive translation, which reads, That's the value of wisdom.

It helps you succeed. So, in any case, we find that in the book of Ecclesiastes, these kinds of practical wisdom precepts are just scattered throughout the entire book. Another one of my favorites that might be interpreted by some to be a kind of reflection on a hedonistic philosophy or worldview, but I would disagree with that, is Ecclesiastes chapter 10 and verse 19, which reads, A feast is made for laughter, and wine makes life merry.

But money is the answer for everything. And so, you read that and you think to yourself, Well, how does that line up with not loving God and money in the book of Matthew? Or how does that line up with 1 Timothy chapter 6 and money being the root of all kinds of evil? I mean, it seems quite out of sync with what we know about what Scripture says about money elsewhere. But when you think about it, in popular teaching, for instance, the kind of teaching you may have been exposed to by a fellow like a Dave Ramsey or some others like that, that teach practical lessons on how to invest and how to save for retirement and how to get out of debt and do these kinds of things, one of the things that you'll find these financial teachers doing is encouraging people to always have a little bit of money saved aside for that proverbial rainy day, for that time when you need it because of an emergency.

You even hear some talk about these as being emergency funds. And they'll tell you, don't have your emergency fund in stocks. Don't have your emergency fund in houses.

Don't have your emergency fund tied up in such a way that you can't access it. Why? Because if it's not liquid, if it's not accessible, then it's really not of any utility to you in that time of need. It seems like Kohelet has given us the same kind of wisdom pertaining to money.

In the time of need, money has tremendous flexibility. A feast is made for laughter. It's good in some sense, but it's limited in the scope of its utility.

And wine makes life merry, but money is the answer for everything. In other words, money has a very flexible way of being profitable to the user. Now if you just take a look at that from a practical vantage point, and you kind of give Kohelet the benefit of the doubt that he is a wise man as he says he is, and you simply look at it as a

wisdom precept on how to navigate life in a hevel world, you find that there's great benefit in taking this proverb at face value.

And I would suggest to you that again, the wisdom of Ecclesiastes is applied to life in an uncertain world. And so Kohelet sees that wisdom is ultimately not going to provide the solution, but it's nevertheless good. It provides advantage for navigating life in a mortal and a fallen world where sometimes things don't happen as expected, but nevertheless, man is gifted and given the opportunity to take advantage of the present.

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes provides that opportunity to better take advantage of the present. All right. Good.