

## Dr. Al Fuhr, Ecclesiastes, Session 6

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It's always tricky on camera. Okay. In spite of the often negative reputation that the book of Ecclesiastes has, the enjoyment of life is a very prominent motif within the book.

As a matter of fact, the enjoyment of life is actually pitched as a kind of conclusion to the issues that Kohelet deals with, along with the fear of God, which we'll be exploring in the next lecture. I like to describe the enjoyment of life and the fear of God as a kind of two-sided wisdom coin. Kohelet is going to come to the conclusion that a wise man will enjoy the days that God has gifted him with, here in this even hevel world, because he doesn't know if tomorrow is going to be guaranteed to him, and death is inevitably in his future.

And so, a wise man will enjoy the days that God has given him. But the wise man will also live in sobriety, in the fear of God, knowing that he will answer for the deeds which he has done. So, it is to this motif of the enjoyment of life that we now turn.

We want to explore its prominence in the book of Ecclesiastes, and its function in the book of Ecclesiastes. The enjoyment of life is pitched seven times within seven refrains in the book. These refrains are scattered throughout the book, beginning in chapter 2 and concluding in chapter 11, so they're not relegated to just one portion of the book of Ecclesiastes.

We see their consistency throughout the book. We actually even see an escalation in the sense in which these enjoyment refrains are commended and even commanded to the people that the Kohelet has assembled to whom he is preaching and teaching to. And so, the enjoyment of life is a theme, a motif, that cannot be ignored in the book of Ecclesiastes.

As a matter of fact, to me, it's quite a shame that many take a very negative approach to the book, all the while seemingly ignoring these enjoyment of life refrains in the teaching that goes alongside of them. Some actually claim them to be concessional statements. Some claim that Kohelet is just rambling off on some kind of wishful thinking here.

I would suggest to you that the enjoyment of life is integral to the message of the book of Ecclesiastes. Now, it is interesting that each one of these enjoy life refrains are found within the context of Kohelet still observing various aspects of life's heaviness. And so, it's not as if these enjoy life refrains are just kind of out there in some part of space where Kohelet first deals with the problems of life and then he provides a kind of solution in the enjoyment of life.

These enjoy life refrains are actually embedded within the language of heaviness that permeates the book. For example, in the first enjoy life refrain that we're exposed to in chapter 2, we find that the enjoyment of life is set against and maybe in companionship to the arduousness of toil. And so, we find in chapter 2 and verse 21 the statement, For a man may do his work, his amal, a word that we've seen before, with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and then he must leave it, leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it.

This too is hevel and a great misfortune. So, it's kind of that negative judgment aspect of heaviness. What does a man get for all his toil, his amal, and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days, his works, are pain and grief.

Even at night his mind does not rest. This too is hevel. So certainly Kohelet is not setting the stage for a positive statement here, is he? But then we find following this arduousness of toil that Kohelet observes and even grieves over, we find a statement.

A man can do nothing better than eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too I see is from the hand of God. For without him who can eat or find enjoyment? It's not as if he's just simply adding a concession, well if this is the best that is found in life, man might as well follow after some kind of hedonistic experience.

But rather he states that the enjoyment of life is a gift from the hand of God. And so it seems like this enjoyment of life is tied to a realistic understanding of life's heaviness and yet nevertheless we don't find Kohelet the pessimist, we find Kohelet the realist who finds the capacity for enjoyment even within the difficulties of our fallen world. We also find that within the midst of the discourse on the impenetrability of time, Kohelet states that enjoyment is something that ought to be seen as a gift from God.

In chapter 3 and verse 9, what does man or what does the worker gain, what yitron is there found in all his amal, in all of his toil? I've seen the burden, that Hebrew word inyon that we were looking at briefly in the last lecture, this kind of imposition of limitation. I've seen the imposition of limitation, the burden, and all the complexities that go with that, that God has laid on men. Part of that is actually the recognition of man's own mortality and that something might exist beyond him.

This is suggested in the following lines. He has made everything beautiful or suitable in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men, a rather ambiguous statement there, but at the very least this seems to imply a recognition beyond the present that mankind has embedded within him.

Yet they cannot, man cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. Again, mortal man who has fallen and is limited even in his wisdom is not able to grasp the full activities of God, of the divine. And so, in light of all of this, Kohelet states, I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live, that everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his amal, all his toil.

This is the gift of God. So, in light of the arduousness of toil, in light of the impenetrability of time, Kohelet recommends the enjoyment of life. And even beyond this, ignorance about the future seems to be a prompt for the enjoyment of life.

In chapter 3 and verse 19 we read that man's fate is like that of the animals. We explored that in the last lecture on the inevitability of death. The same fate awaits them both.

As one dies, so dies the other. But Kohelet is not left in a state of hopeless despair. Rather, the wise man states in light of this, rather than in spite of this, I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work because that is his lot.

Now this is the Hebrew word heleq. We'll explore this in a bit more detail later. The Hebrew word heleq could be understood variously as a portion or a lot, or I would actually prefer the translation a lot meant.

In other words, a heleq is something that God gifts man with, a capacity to find enjoyment, something which is actually in some sense an aspect of grace within the midst of judgment. If you think back to Genesis chapter 3, things seem pretty bleak with the fall and the curse and yet God has continued to gift man with opportunities to find enjoyment and to find achievement even within a fallen world. A wise man will understand this and will find these opportunities and take advantage of them.

So Kohelet seems to be commending that kind of sense of enjoyment even within the midst of the recognition that man does not know his future and death is inevitably in his future. In other words, he's on a trajectory towards death but he knows nothing about when that will occur. We also find another aspect of heaviness explored and observed in chapter 5 of Ecclesiastes, the loss of gain.

In other words, when a man builds something, when he has something, achieves something, and due to the heaviness of life, these things are off or not and he loses them. In chapter 5 and verse 16, this too is a grievous evil. So, a kind of negative judgment made on this aspect of heaviness.

As a man comes, so he departs, and what does he gain since he toils for the wind? All his days he eats in darkness with great frustration, affliction, and anger. Then I

realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink. Remember in chapter 6 and verse 12, Kohelet kind of readjusts the quest to finding what is good.

He's telling us in these refrains, this is what I have found to be good. It is good and proper for a man to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor. Under the sun during the few days, the hevel days of life that God has given him, for this is his lot.

Some could see this as a negative thing. Others could see the enjoyment of life as actually quite a positive thing. An allotment, a gift of grace that God gives in the midst of a fallen, hevel world.

Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions and enables him to enjoy them, accept his lot or allotment, and be happy in his work, this is the gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, these passing days, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart. So even within the context of gain, loss to various means and various circumstances, God has nevertheless gifted man with the enjoyment or the capacity to enjoy life.

In chapter 8 and verse 15, we find that the enjoyment of life is commended even against injustices that are observed in the world. Remember, and we've read this a few times before, Kohelet is very perplexed. He's actually quite upset at the very fact that sometimes he observes righteous people getting what the wicked deserve and the wicked getting what the righteous deserve.

And so, in verse 14 he says, I've seen something else hevel in this world, in this earth. Righteous men get what the wicked deserve, the wicked get what the righteous deserve. I say that this too is hevel.

So, I commend the enjoyment of life. Again, some could see this as a kind of concession. Well, if this is the way it's going to be, then at least we ought to go out and do such and such.

But Kohelet is not necessarily dealing with a kind of hedonistic enjoyment. He's not saying, well, if God is going to treat us this way, we might as well go out and do things in such and such a matter to get the most, maybe the last little drop of enjoyment that we can out of life. Rather, he observes that even in the midst of such angst and even in the midst of such hevelness, God has gifted man with the capacity to enjoy.

And so only a fool would neglect that opportunity. Rather, a wise man will embrace it. So, I commend the enjoyment of life because there is nothing better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and to be glad.

Then joy will accompany him in all of his work, that toil, that amal that we've seen before, all the days of his life that God has given him under the sun, no matter how few those days and how uncertain those days may be. It's a kind of wisdom of probabilities in the present. In other words, Kohelet commends the enjoyment of life and taking opportunities, you know, really that God gifts us with in the here and now.

Now something that is very interesting alongside of the context of hevelness that these enjoy life refrains are found within, we also find that the enjoy life refrains are not just stated in a uniform matter, but they actually escalate throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. In other words, early on, the enjoy life refrains seem to be observational. It's almost as if Kohelet is pondering the evidence before him, and he says, I see that in the midst of all of these problems, God still does give man the enjoyment or the capacity to enjoy life, and that's a good thing.

But as he continues to ponder and seek after that which is good, even if wisdom is unable to ultimately bring a solution to the dilemma of Hebel, it still nevertheless supplies a wise man with things that are good. He explores that it is the enjoyment of life indeed that a wise man ought to commend to those who will hear him. And so we find an escalation throughout the refrains.

In other words, as we begin this in chapter 2, in the first one of these refrains, we find in chapter 2 and verse 24 simply the statement, a man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. The second one, I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live, in chapter 3 and verse 12. Later on in chapter 3 and verse 22, Kohelet states, so I saw, again observational, I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work because that is his lot, his heleq, his allotment.

But then later on we see some movement taking place in chapter 5 and verse 18. Then I realize that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life that God has given him. This is his allotment.

As we move along into chapter 8, and this is where we see the escalation really taking place, Kohelet now commends the enjoyment of life, verse 15 of chapter 8, so I commend the enjoyment of life. But where things end up becoming imperative commandment are in chapter 9 and chapter 11. Again, the movement seems to escalate throughout the book.

In chapter 9, after pondering the inevitability of death and the fact that mankind can know nothing concerning his future, the fact that God has one up on him, Kohelet realizes that the thing which man is commanded to do even is to go and to enjoy life. So chapter 9 and verse 7, we find in the Hebrew text the imperative. Go, eat your

food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do.

Again, a kind of wisdom theology of the present. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this hevel life, this fleeting life that God has given you under the sun, all your hevel days.

For this is your allotment, your heleq, your lot in life, and in your amal, your toilsome labor. Under the sun, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. For in the grave, the sheol, where you're going, there is neither working, nor planning, nor knowledge, nor wisdom.

And then in chapter 11, quite clearly we find this escalation coming to some form of conclusion. In chapter 11 and verse 9, the statement is made, Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow your ways, or follow the ways of your heart, and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things, God will bring you to judgment.

So, there we find that two-sided wisdom coin. To the young man, enjoy life. Grasp every opportunity.

Live in the present, but all the while live in sobriety, recognizing that you will answer for the deeds that you have done. A wonderful wisdom paradigm on how to make the most of every opportunity, and how to view life positively as a gift from God, even in the midst of the curse that we all live under as fallen creatures in a fallen world. And then Kohelet continues on to emphasize remembering God and preparing yourself for a day when you will answer for the deeds that you have done.

So, the enjoyment of life, is found seven times in seven refrains throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. Structurally speaking, these words are found in refrains, which cannot be simply stated to fit in alignment as some kind of a later addition to the book, or some kind of a subsidiary element of Kohelet's perhaps giving in some concessional way, but they seem to be integral and integrated into the very core message of the book. Now to take a little bit of time to explore some of the traits of these enjoy life refrains beyond the obvious escalation that we've looked at in the kind of hevelness context that we find the enjoyment of life found within, a few of the phrases that you find to be stock phrases or terms within the enjoy life refrains, one of course is joy.

Simcha is the Hebrew word here. Now this is a fairly common word. It's found about 275 times throughout the Old Testament.

Simcha is a word that is found in relationship to festival texts in the Old Testament. So, when the Old Testament saints would have celebrated festivals under the law in ancient Israel, you would have found that joy would have accompanied these celebrations. Simcha was a part of the package in the festivals of ancient Israel.

You also find that in the Psalter, in the praise psalms where God is praised or where God is celebrated, or perhaps where the king is celebrated in the psalms of praise, you'll find the word simcha used frequently to express the joy that would have accompanied the praise of the Lord or the praise of what God in the Thanksgiving that is associated with what God is doing in Israel's world or in the life of ancient Israel. You'll find that the prophets, when they speak oracles of salvation and restoration language, they'll sometimes use the word simcha to refer to the kind of things that would have accompanied God's restoration activity for Israel. So, in the midst of judgment, in the midst of all of the troubles of exile and all of the experiences that Israel underwent that the prophets proclaimed, God was meting out against them because of the iniquities of the nations and I'm thinking in particular of the divided kingdom period of Israel and Judah, you'll find that when the prophets speak of restoration, they associate that with a time of celebration, a time of festive joy, simcha.

But you'll also find, interestingly enough, that the word does, in some context, connote the idea of just pleasure. So, it's not just a pious kind of religious festivity of joy or some kind of a sanctimonious joy that we find in relationship to this word. Actually, in chapter 5 of the book of Proverbs, the statement regarding the wife of one's in the book of Ecclesiastes in the Enjoy Life refrains here, you find the statement, May your fountain be blessed that you may rejoice, simcha, with the wife of your youth.

And so there doesn't seem to be a religious component there to celebrating with the wife of your youth. You see the capacity of this word, much like many words in the book of Ecclesiastes, to kind of connote different meanings and ideas, oftentimes packaged together. I would suggest to you that in the context of the Enjoy Life refrains, it's not so much a kind of religious reverence of joy, as we might find it in the Psalter that is at the focus, nor is it a kind of hedonistic pleasure-seeking that we find at the core of the Enjoy Life refrains, but rather, they are the simple pleasures that God has gifted man with.

It's from that that man ought to find and experience simcha, joy. Consider this for a second. Wherever you might find yourself today, have you experienced a helek, a portion, an allotment of joy that God has gifted you with today? I would certainly hope that we have experienced in our lives these kinds of graces that God provides us with.

Now, certainly, I'm not trying to be one who is oblivious to the sufferings of humanity, and even here in the 21st century, we find that there is great suffering in the world. If Kohelet was living today, I could see him penning chapter 4 just the way that he did. We read chapter 4 and verses 1 through 3 earlier on in a previous lecture about there being no comforter, and we think of refugees today, we think of those who are suffering in the midst and the toil of poverty, we think of those who have physical ailment, and certainly it's hard sometimes to see joy being extrapolated from those experiences in life, and yet when you think about the curse and what occurs after sin enters into the world, one might think that there would never again be the capacity to find joy, and yet in the present experience of living in a hevel world, God nevertheless gifts us with these kinds of graces.

It's amazing to me that I just went out and ate a wonderful lunch, a great sandwich with steamed vegetables. I wish I had had a dessert, that would have been even some extra simcha perhaps, but I had a very, very nutritious meal, and you know, I have the opportunity to eat those on a very regular basis. It's God's grace in the midst of judgment.

Do I have the opportunity to enjoy time with friends? Do I have the opportunity to enjoy the creation of God in the mountains, on the rivers or in the oceans? I've been able to experience many opportunities to find joy. I would suggest to you that Kohelet sees that as a good thing, and he sees wisdom as providing opportunity and capacity to find those things and to make the most of the opportunities that God provides. We can certainly contextualize that into the Christian experience in serving God, and I would certainly not dismiss that, but remember that in wisdom literature, not everything has to necessarily be religious in order to be godly, and I think that God does provide for us experiences in the present, even those things which we might call secular or normative experiences in this world, to find pleasure and to see a glimpse of the grace of God that he provides his people with, even in the midst of a fallen world.

Kohelet would tell us the wise man will find those things, and the wise man will not dismiss those opportunities. In any case, Simcha, is a very important word to be found in the Enjoy Life refrains. We see in some of these refrains that they're introduced with the phrase, there is nothing better.

Ein Tov, the idea that there is good to be found, and of course, if we understand part of Kohelet's quest to be the finding of good, what wisdom might be able to provide in finding good in a hevel world, we ought to be paying attention to these refrains when they're introduced by statements, there is nothing better. There is nothing better than to, and again I'm going to repeat myself in chapter two, nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in work. I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live.



I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work. And so, Ain Tov, there is nothing better. There is good to be found in this.

Each refrain additionally suggests that there is this idea of a maul, of toil that is a part of the present experience. Now, this is important to think back to Genesis chapter three and what happens in the fall. Does God create work as a part of the penalty, or rather is it heaviness in work? It seems to me that God created Adam with the capacity to work and to even find enjoyment in that work.

But that work is frustrated by the fall. And so today you find farmers farming the land and they farm the land and they find satisfaction in a crop that comes to harvest. But what happens when a flood comes along and ruins the fruits of their labor, so to speak? Or what happens when a drought occurs and all of their labor is for naught? We're thinking back to the ancient context before you had various insecticides and pesticides and you didn't have the fertilizers and the irrigation systems that we have in the modern world.

Think about what the ancients dealt with. They would have toiled and plowed a field. They would have put to labor their oxen, but they were certainly a part of that work as well.

And they would have labored under the sun and yet what happens? Did they always find the fruit of their labors coming to completion? Sometimes they would find hevel things occurring. The locust plague, the drought, the flood. And so we find that toil itself and labor, amal, is a rather neutral term.

It's a neutral term found throughout Ecclesiastes, but when it's put into companionship with the hevelness of life we find that all too often toil is for naught. I teach college students and I frequently get emails from college students that say, this or that has occurred, can I submit this paper later? It's because of the hevelness of life that sometimes these things occur. Now sometimes it's simply the neglect of students in putting off assignments that they should have been doing much further in advance.

But sometimes legitimate things do happen in life that are beyond our control. And students look for a little bit of grace in those things. It's not so much that the effort that they put forth in producing something which is quality, it's not that that is necessarily bad or frustrating, but rather it's when you spend weeks writing a paper and it's so good.

You feel like you've contributed something. You've learned something and you can't wait to submit that paper and then the dog eats it. That's kind of getting antiquated.

Today it's the computer of Austin. And who knows what might occur in the future, but hevelness is going to continue to be the common experience. It's going out and buying a car only to find somebody else running into that car.

Or it's the experience of getting on a road trip to find that your car breaks down part way through and now you're in such turmoil and trouble. There are so many experiences that we have with hevelness in this life. It's not a maul, it's not toil that is necessarily bad.

As a matter of fact, when a man can find satisfaction or a woman can find satisfaction in their labor, that is a good thing. From that, we extrapolate simcha. We extrapolate joy.

But when a man can't receive or can't experience or for some foolish reason neglects to be able to experience the satisfaction of their labor as a gift from God, that's when we find something which is utterly frustrating, a grievous evil, something that Kohelet would say might even cause a hatred for life. And so, the satisfaction of one's labor is an integral part to the enjoy life refrains. Now I've also suggested to you that this idea of an allotment, a heleq, is very, very important in our studies of Ecclesiastes and the enjoy life motif.

Now this word heleq is found eight times in the book of Ecclesiastes, four times set within these enjoy life refrains. Let me again read for you the four examples where we find the word heleq in the enjoy life refrains. In chapter 3 and verse 22, So I saw that there is nothing better, for a man than to enjoy his work, his amal, because this is, or that is, his heleq.

His lot, as the NIV translates it, other translations might have a portion. I again would suggest to you that maybe we ought to look at this as a more positive thing. It's not just his lot as if it's his burden in life.

As a matter of fact, we've seen the word burden before, inyon, which Kohelet uses, but Kohelet doesn't use that word here in this context. It's not a burden in life. It's not a lot in life, as in this is the best we might be able to do, but rather it's an allotment.

It's something that God gifts us with, a glimpse of his grace in the midst of heaviness, in the midst of judgment. And don't we know that God is a God who gives grace even in the midst of judgment. We find also the word lot, or heleq, found in chapter 5 in verses 18 and 19.

So twice within this enjoy life refrain, then I realize that it is good and proper for man to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor, his amal, under the sun during the few days of life God has given him, for this is his lot. We might see

enjoyment itself here in this context as a kind of allotment. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, the various things by which we have capacity to find enjoyment, and enables him to enjoy them to accept his lot, his gift, his allotment in life and be happy in his work, and again, an allotment and the work that we have been given as opportunities in this world, these seem to be companions here in the enjoy life refrains, this is the gift of God.

He seldom reflects on the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart. And then later in chapter 9, that very important segment where the enjoy life refrain really comes to a head as an imperative commandment, a wisdom commandment, if you will. Enjoy life with your wife whom you love all the days of this hevel life that God has given you under the sun, all your hevel days, for this is your heleq in life, your allotment in life.

I would suggest to you that an allotment is both the material thing that God gifts us with and the capacity to find enjoyment through wisdom in view of those things which God gives us as graces within the midst of a hevel judgment. And so, the enjoy life refrain, is integral to the message of the book of Ecclesiastes, but very much tied to the fear of God. Do not doubt the fact that the enjoyment of life, while significant, is not antithetical to the fear of God.

The enjoyment of life is not some kind of a hedonistic pursuit. It is not a matter of enjoying sin, but rather it's a matter of enjoying the gifts that God provides for a wise man to enjoy. And it's a matter of mindset and attitude as well.

If a person sees the gifts of God as opportunities for enjoyment, Kohelet will say that is wise, is a wise attitude to perceive these things by. But if mankind is continually striving for something that he can't take home with him anyway, if it's a matter of amassing wealth and pleasure for the sake of only seeing it come for naught, to not even being able to leave it, to one who comes after, and yet through that process of amassing these things, to find no joy, no simcha in them, Kohelet would call that individual a fool. And so, the wisdom of Ecclesiastes very much embraces the possibilities of the present to enjoy life as a gift from God.