

Sunday July 30, 2023  
 Lesson 9: Guided by God's Wisdom  
 Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

**Context:**

Today we continue our summer curriculum, "Inspired By God." In this last lesson of our second unit, "Wisdom," we conclude our focus on the gift of wisdom from God to humanity. Today we look at one of the most famous books of wisdom in the Bible as well as ancient wisdom literature, the book of Ecclesiastes. We will seek to see God as Creator in all things and respond to life's events guided by God's wisdom.

Today and in ancient times, the book of Ecclesiastes has been seen as a strange and occasionally controversial book of the Bible. Because of its unorthodox views, and early in the Common Era, rabbinical authorities disagreed about whether the book should be included in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Yet because the author and ruminations are attributed to David's successor Solomon, both rabbis and the church accepted in its uniqueness as part of God's gift to biblical tradition.<sup>2</sup> The central writer is "Qoheleth" and functions as both an editor and composer of the book. The oldest manuscript of Ecclesiastes is one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, dated to mid-second century BCE so the book was most likely written earlier than that.<sup>3</sup> In reading, one can tell of allusions to the monarchical era when David and Solomon reigned on the throne of Israel.

The book does not have a clear pattern as much of it seems to be a collection of thoughts with no structure. The editor/author Qoheleth has been called a skeptic, a nihilist, an existentialist, a pessimist, and a realist.<sup>4</sup> There is a focus on the human existence and where is God amid the human experience. Throughout the book is the motto, "vanity of vanity, all is vanity," which can be translated to *hebel*, a word to mean "breath of breaths." The word *hebel* occurs more than thirty times in the book and expresses the main point: human effort on any plane is insignificant and transitory.<sup>5</sup> It speaks of the fleeting nature of human life.

The passage today emphasizes this point of the fleeting nature of life as it dives into concepts of time and space. This famous poem is often misunderstood as it can be invoked to support both military action and pacifism.<sup>6</sup> Yet the poem speaks more of how humans will be unaware of the different events in their life. Thus, the best humans can do is enjoy life and to see how the gift of time and one life is the only guarantee we are given. And people of faith are called to see how this wisdom from God should give us aide and support.

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<sup>1</sup> Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 481.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 482.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 483.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## Application

The book of Ecclesiastes has become one of my favorite books of the Bible, going at odds with what most people say about the book as some believe it is too real and at times encouraging of hedonism. Yet as I look at my life, I see how the book has popped up at different times and God invites me to see its message repeatedly. Full of paradox and mystery, the book gives those who read it a wonderful place to see both the gift and fragility of life.

The passage today speaks of how there are seasons where things happen under the heavens: there is a time for all things from birth to death, including all things in between like laughter and crying, planting and uprooting, being silent and speaking up. All these things happen throughout different seasons and there is something for every matter under the heavens.

When we think of the heavens, we are most likely to think about God who created the heavens and the earth. Which tells us about the chief actor in these passages is not us, it is God. God is the one who is the creator of all seasons and things. And it is God's wisdom which should be the one to guide us in how we live.

For those of us who read this passage, we might at times wonder where we are during it. Yet notice how the writer never tells the readers the prompts for the situations. Simply the author invites the reader to see these things will happen and there are responses which are normal, part of life. Nowhere does the author tell people to create war or to throw stones. Instead, time will go on and the Holy Spirit will prompt when these things are on the table.

The time the book of Ecclesiastes came to the forefront for me was when a mentor suggested a book written on its content to help me process various events in life. The book, *Against the Grain*, was written to offer a way to affirm the goodness of creation and awe of God even as we acknowledge troubling spiritual moods. As we admit to the emotions we have in life, Ecclesiastes helps us to grow in wisdom and accept God's gifts. What was also fascinating about the book suggestion was the author was someone who I had dinner alongside as they were a relative of a school colleague. And we had discussed the very concepts in the book at dinner! Talk about a moment where the Holy Spirit was at work.

When we initially read this passage, we might wonder what we can do to prepare for things like the signs of war or the time for tearing apart. I have come to find though when we do so we miss out on the other things of life as we focus so much on the future, we do not enjoy the present. We get into the idea we can sometimes control the future and the seasons.

This is not to say we cannot be proactive or have safety plans. Moreso, I think the book of Ecclesiastes invites us to see wisdom come more from facing those seasons in light trusting the Spirit to guide us for what is right. This can be hard, especially as at times we act more on reactions or strong feelings. We want the answers given directly to us with a playbook, everything scripted out to a "T" the way we want it to be.

Instead, like Qoheleth suggests, we should see life as a gift and at times there is not a lot we can do to change things. Where we are given the choice though is how we respond when things do happen, allowing for feelings and emotions to be expressed and seeing those as a gift as well. It is when we can lean into those feelings and emotions to just be, true transformation can happen and see how the Lord gives values to things in our lives.

Perhaps the best place I have seen this work out is when we do our grief work. I have come to find most people's anger or hatred is rooted in some misplaced mourning of something. It might be of a loved one who died years ago, a job or vocation which didn't work as one liked, or even difficult family of origin or other relationship dynamics which still play a role in how one sees life. Everyone, whether they want to admit or not, will come to grieve something in this

life.

If we pay attention to the book of Ecclesiastes, we see these things as normal whether it is anger, disappointment, or sadness all tied to the fragility of life. Yet what our writer suggested is we do not just translate those events; we search for the ways God transforms us in them. We see how God works through all seasons giving us the wisdom to see God will always be at work in our lives even in the dark or in the pain. It is when we see time as a fragile gift, we see how God gives us the wisdom to face the things which happened in the past, the things in the present, and the things to come. God invites us to enjoy life, to be merry, and to take the journey as it comes.

How have seasons of your life taught you things about God and yourself? Why do you think Christians sometimes shy away from messy or complex emotions? What are the ways you might see transformation behind things you face? Who are people who show wisdom to you in life's journey? Where do you see God at work in this season of your life?

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