

PART ONE

SECTION 2

COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY

ECCLESIASTES 4:17 – 6:9

Attitude before God

4:17 Watch how you behave when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is more acceptable than the sacrifice offered by fools; for they are not aware of the evil they are doing.

5:1 Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word to God, for God is in heaven, and you are on the earth. Therefore let your words be few,² for as a dream comes with many cares, so a fool's voice comes with many words.

3 When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill what you vow. ⁴It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfill it.

5 Do not let your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say in God's presence that it was a mistake, lest God be angry at your words, and destroy the work of your hands.

6 There is an abundance of empty dreams, and there are words aplenty.

But as for you, fear God.

Some English translations number this section as beginning with chapter 5 verse 1. I am following the Hebrew verse numbering (which is followed by the Greek and Latin).

This is the third passage to focus our reflections on God (see 2:24-26; 3:10-17). Like the prophets (see Amos 5:22-24; Hosea 6:6), Qohelet is not anti-cult. In verse 17, she is simply reiterating the first commandment: 'Listen, Israel' (Deuteronomy 6:4).

Verse 1 reminds us of the words of Jesus:

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

– Matthew 6:7

Typically, Qohelet emphasises God's transcendence ('God is in heaven; you are on earth'). Gabbling away before God is living in a make-believe world. It leads only to anxiety. Keep your prayer simple and mean what you say.

Verses 3-4 warn against supporting what you intend doing by making a solemn promise to God. Qohelet is not against the making of vows, but it should not be done lightly, and we must do what we have promised.

People must not try to get out of fulfilling their vow by claiming that 'it was a mistake'. This can only arouse God's anger.

There's no point in piling up words in relation to God. What can words change? We won't get a response. (We might make the point that prayer faces us towards God and opens us to the inflowing of God's life-spirit.)

In relation to God we must 'fear God', that is to say, we must recognise the transcendence of God, and the awe and respect that must characterise our approach to God.

This is the third time that Qohelet has brought up the subject of injustice and oppression (see 3:16; 4:1).

The first sub-unit (verses 7-11) is about people who cannot be satisfied. The word translated 'province' in verse 7 [מִדְּנָה, m^edînâ] is derived from the word for judgment [דִּין, dîn]. This suggests that a province should be a place where one could expect to find justice! Qohelet stresses the extent of the corruption among those who are determined to become wealthy at any price (see the Introduction pages 111-113). They'll do anything to get richer, but there's always someone higher up the ladder. In verse 8 she is warning people not to acquire property just to acquire it (compare Isaiah 5:18). Land is for cultivation and for enjoying the fruits. There is no benefit in postponing present enjoyment in anticipation of some greater benefit in the future (verse 10). Verse 11 picks up 4:6. The poor worker sleeps while worry keeps the greedy awake .

The second sub-unit (verses 12-16) is about people who cannot enjoy themselves. They can't resist acquiring. They hoard, but one slip or twist of fate and they lose it all. Life is unpredictable. Hoarding wealth guarantees nothing, certainly not happiness. In verse 14 Qohelet cites a popular saying (compare Job 1:21; Sirach 40:1; and in the Newer Testament, 1Timothy 6:7). If you are going to enjoy what you have, you can only do so while you are alive. There is no point in hoarding. Unable to enjoy life, these people live 'in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment' (verse 16).

⁷If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter; for the arrogant official is watched by a more arrogant one, and there are yet more arrogant ones over them.

⁸The advantage of the land is in its provision, that is, if the field is cultivated for its provision. ⁹The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is empty and pointless. ¹⁰When goods increase, those who consume them increase. But what accomplishment do those who possess it have, except what their eyes see? ¹¹Sweet is the sleep of labourers, whether they eat little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep.

¹²There is a grievous ill that I have observed under the sun: riches were hoarded by their owners to their hurt, ¹³and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands. ¹⁴As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands. ¹⁵Yes, that is a grievous ill: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have from toiling for the wind? ¹⁶Besides, all their days they eat in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment.

Enjoy what you can

¹⁷This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun during the few days of the life God has given us; for this is our apportioned lot. ¹⁸Indeed, God has enabled all to whom he has given wealth and possessions to enjoy them, and to accept their allotted portion and find enjoyment in their toil – this is the gift of God.

¹⁹For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.

^{6:1}There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon humankind: ²those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honour, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire, yet God does not enable them to enjoy these things, but a stranger enjoys them. There is no point in this; it is a grievous ill.

Here, for the fourth time, Qohelet is challenging us to look beyond the experience we have ‘under the sun’ and reflect on the Transcendent One. Having outlined in the previous two sub-units the folly of thinking that acquiring and hoarding will bring happiness, in the third sub-unit (verses 17-18), Qohelet states what for her alone makes sense. Our lives are limited. There is injustice and oppression. We have to toil to survive. Well, ‘eat, drink, and find enjoyment in all the toil’ (verse 17; compare 3:10-15). When ‘God gives’, enjoy the gift. Accept your ‘allotted portion’ and enjoy what you can (see 2:10, 24; 3:13).

Verse 19 is the hinge for this section and contains its key teaching. Qohelet is advising us not to focus in an unhealthy way on the negatives, for if we do so, we will not notice or relish the positives. We must ensure that we are free to accept and enjoy the pleasures that come our way. God has made it possible for us to forget the negatives, including the ultimate meaninglessness of our ephemeral lives, by giving us an instinct for enjoyment. Follow it. Indulge it. Accept God’s gift of joy.

The fourth sub-unit in this section (chapter 6, verses 1-2) forms a kind of mirror image of the third sub-unit above (verses 17-18). Qohelet does not take back what she said in the former passage, but she wants to point out that there are exceptions. Life is a paradox. Sometimes it is not the person gifted by God who has the enjoyment, but someone else. There is no escaping the arbitrariness of life. Qohelet is not claiming that she is making sense of it. Ultimately ‘there is no point’. All is in vain (‘chasing the wind’ as she has said often enough). It’s hard, but we are not in control. God is.

The fifth sub-unit (verses 3-6) forms a kind of mirror image of the second (chapter 5, verses 17-18). Here again Qohelet is instancing people who can't enjoy what they have. Having children and a long life are often seen as among the best gifts God can give. However, they don't automatically bring joy. People who are preoccupied with such matters can even worry that they don't have a 'burial site'(verse 3)! If you live that way you are worse off than a stillborn child. You end up the same but spend your 'life' worrying – something the stillborn doesn't do.

Qohelet is aware of the fact that she is exaggerating here to make a point. Later she will admit that being alive is better than being dead: 'a living dog is better than a dead lion'(9:4).

The final sub-unit (verses 7-9) forms a kind of mirror image of the first (chapter 5, verses 7-11). Both focus on our insatiable urge to acquire.

Isaiah speaks of Sheol, the region where the dead eke out a shadowy, lifeless, existence. Sheol has an insatiable appetite:

Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened
its mouth beyond measure.

– Isaiah 5:14

See also Proverbs 27:20.

Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied,
and human eyes are never satisfied.

The oppressors have the same greedy appetite (see Habakkuk 1:13; 2:5; Isaiah 57:4), and the wise are gobbled up along with the fools (verse 8).

How are the oppressed and afflicted going to learn to cope (verse 8)? Qohelet falls back to her basic advice: take whatever joy you can from the moment. We experience profound longings (verse 9), but we think to satisfy them in foolish ways (compare 2:1). It makes no sense to chase after wind!

³Even if a man begets a hundred children, and live many years, however many years he may live if he does not enjoy life's good things, and if he has no burial site – I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.

⁴For he comes into life for no good reason and he goes into darkness, and in darkness his name is lost. ⁵Even the one who has not seen the sun or known it has more repose than he. ⁶Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good – do not all go to the same place?

⁷All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied.

⁸For what advantage have the wise over fools?

What good does it do the poor person to know how to get along with living?

⁹Better what the eye sees than the wandering of desire.

This also is vanity, a chasing after wind.

