

PART TWO

SECTION 1

NOTHING MAKES SENSE

ECCLESIASTES 6:10 – 8:17

How much do we really know?

¹⁰Whatever happens has already been assigned; the course of human beings is known, and they are not able to dispute with the one who is stronger than they.

¹¹The more words we use the less sense we make. So what is the point?

¹²Who knows what is good for human beings in life, in the few days of their fleeting existence? They will pass through them like a shadow.

Who can tell them what their future will be under the sun?

^{7:1}A good name is better than precious ointment.

And the day of death is better than the day of birth!

Here we begin the second part of the book in which Qohelet keeps reminding us of what we do not and cannot know. She makes the point in verse 10 that it is God who controls whatever happens, including human destiny, and we cannot contend with God (see the reflection in the Introduction page 113).

Words abound, but how many actually help understanding (verse 11; see 5:6)? In spite of all the words that claim to interpret the meaning of human existence, the fact is no one 'knows what is good for human beings in life' (verse 12; compare Job 8:9).

The Psalmist acknowledges:

Human beings are like a breath;
their days are like a passing shadow.

– Psalm 144:4

He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind
that passes and does not come again.

– Psalm 78:39

When their breath departs, they return to the
earth; on that very day their plans perish.

– Psalm 146:4

Having said that, Qohelet goes on to list a number of proverbial sayings that claim to know what is better (chapter 7, verses 1-8). These are given as examples of the 'many words' (verse 11) that claim to help us find meaning and direction in life. But how reliable are they? Even if they contain an element of truth, taken together they are just so much empty talk.

In verse 1, the 'wise' claim that a good reputation is a way of enjoying immortality:

The human body is a fleeting thing, but a virtuous name will never be blotted out. Have regard for your name, since it will outlive you longer than a thousand hoards of gold. The days of a good life are numbered, but a good name lasts forever.

– Sirach 41:11-13

Qohelet criticises this adage by drawing its logical (but obviously foolish) conclusion. If this is true it would mean that the day of death (which claims to give immortality through reputation) is better than the day of birth!

Verses 2-4 carry on from verse 1. Qohelet takes two extreme snippets of ‘wisdom’ from the tradition. She sets out to confuse us. Are we really meant to enjoy a wake more than a wedding? Is it only fools that enjoy a wedding banquet? Is sorrow really better than laughter?

In verse 5 Qohelet appears to agree with traditional wisdom. In verse 6 she offers an image to underline the little value to be had in listening to the chattering of fools. You can use thorn bushes for fuel. They make a lot of noise, but they don’t last long. However, even here we are left unsure. Listening to the ‘wise’ is just as chancey as listening to fools. It is all ‘vanity’ (verse 6). The wise can be fooled (verse 7).

Qohelet continues her argument in verse 8. More important than working out whether the person giving advice is wise or foolish is to look at the results of what happens when we follow advice.

This, in turn, is questioned in verse 9, at least as far as anger is concerned. Is it really good to be ‘patient’ in the sense of holding one’s anger back, leaving it lodging in your heart till the right moment?

We sometimes wish we lived in more predictable times when we could trust the advice of the wise and live a productive life. Qohelet doesn’t encourage such thoughts. It is true (as she has been saying) that the ‘wisdom’ of the past is not that reliable in a world that is so different (see the comments offered in the Introduction, pages 111-113). We have to live now, and it is not wise to wish we lived in earlier times (verse 10).

In verse 11 she says that wisdom is ‘as good as’ (in other words, no better than) an inheritance – one is as unreliable as the other (see 5:13-17). Enjoy knowledge and wisdom, but know that they don’t give permanent protection. They are but a passing shadow (verse 12).

²It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting. Since this is the end of everyone, let the living take it to heart. ³Sorrow is better than laughter, for in the sadness of the countenance the heart will be glad. ⁴The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

⁵It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. ⁶For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of fools. But this also is vanity.

⁷Surely oppression makes the wise foolish, and a bribe corrupts the heart.

⁸Better is the end of a matter than its beginning; the patient in spirit are better than the proud in spirit.

⁹Do not be quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.

¹⁰Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these?” For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

¹¹Wisdom is as good as an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun. ¹²For wisdom is as a shadow; money is as a shadow; knowledge is an advantage; wisdom lets its possessor live.

Consider the activity of God

¹³Consider the activity of God. Who can make straight what he has made crooked?

¹⁴When good times come accept the good, and in bad times consider that God has made the one as well as the other so that we can't know what is coming next.

¹⁵In my fleeting lifetime I have seen both: there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who live long in their evil-doing.

¹⁶Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise, lest you be in for a shock.

¹⁷Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool, lest you die before your time?

¹⁸It is better that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God will venture forth in life with both.

In verses 13-14, Qohelet links back with her opening statement (chapter 6, verse 10). We can't change or hope to understand what God gives. Accept it, make the best of it. We have no way of knowing what will come next. Seize the moment.

'Both' in verse 15 refers back to the straight and the crooked that God has established (verses 13-14), and forward to what happens to the righteous and the wicked. Traditional 'wisdom' asserts that the good are rewarded with long life and the wicked perish. Here (verse 15), as throughout his work, the author of Ecclesiastes calls us to look at the facts.

Qohelet's advice then is for us not to be overconfident in our righteousness or our wisdom. Don't assume that if we were more righteous or more wise things would work out better for us. It doesn't work that way. This doesn't mean that wisdom is of no value. Being excessively foolish doesn't lead anywhere. Her advice is to accept ourselves as we are: a little wise, but a little foolish too. That's the way we are made. Today we might say that we need to embrace our shadow side.

In verse 19 Qohelet appears to be thinking of the people who are close to those who wield power, and who are buying up properties to acquire wealth, but who don't care for the land or for the people who are being disinherited (see the Introduction pages 111-113). Their fixation on acquiring wealth doesn't prolong their life. Neither does a person's fixation on becoming wise (verse 19), or righteous (verse 20). No one is above sinning. The Psalmist prays:

Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.

– Psalm 143:2

Qohelet is not talking about hypocrisy. She is warning against being presumptuous, being over-confident in our ability to achieve perfection. That is to fail to 'fear God' (verse 18).

A person who is fixated on being perfect will read everything that is said as a criticism, even when it comes from a subordinate. Such super-sensitivity is unwise. How would you like it if your superiors took everything you said as a criticism of them?

What happens in this world is beyond our control or understanding. Wisdom is elusive (compare 8:17).

The Psalmist agrees (Psalm 73:16-17):

I kept thinking about all this, but it was too difficult for me.

He adds:

until I went into the mystery of God.

Qohelet compares herself to a merchant who is trying to account for everything so as to balance the books. Traditional wisdom gives the impression that you can draw a line between wisdom and folly. Qohelet knows it is not that simple.

¹⁹Wisdom is more significant to the wise than wealth to the property owners in the city.

²⁰But there is no one on earth so righteous as to do only good without ever sinning.

²¹Do not take to heart the things that people say.

You may hear your servant slighting you, ²²but very often, your heart knows that you have yourself slighted others.

²³All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me.

²⁴All that happens is inaccessible, and unfathomable; who can work it out?

²⁵I set my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and to account for the way things are, and to know that wickedness is folly and that foolishness is madness.

26Here is what I have found: more bitter than death is a woman who is a snare, when her heart is a trap and her arms chains. When God so pleases, a man can escape from this, but the one who fails will get caught.

27Look at what I have found, says Qohelet, adding one thing to another to account for the way things are – ²⁸something my mind has sought repeatedly, but I have not found a solution.

I found one human being out of a thousand, but no woman did I find among them all.

29See, this alone I found, that God makes human beings straight, but they have devised many schemes.

Before attempting to grasp what is being said here we should look back to what Qohelet said earlier about the benefits of the partnership of man and woman (see 4:9-12).

Qohelet is thinking of the ideal woman, the embodiment of wisdom, but she, too, is elusive. Not all women live up to what they are called and graced to be, and when a woman is foolish, she can be worse than any hunter, and a man can be snared by her. Her heart can be a trap, and her arms fetters. Qohelet spoke earlier of the happiness that can be experienced in the communion of man and woman. Here she is making the obvious point that this happiness is not guaranteed.

If a man manages to escape the seduction, he should thank God, for he is especially favoured. However, since (as he has already said in verse 20) we are all sinners, he should not be too surprised when he finds himself trapped.

Qohelet goes further in verses 27-28. Because there is so much folly in the world – and we have heard a lot about male folly in seeking to satisfy the longings of the human heart in power, wealth and the fame of success – she kept hoping to find wisdom in woman. The opportunities for women to be distracted into these false ways were not there in the culture out of which Ecclesiastes was composed. Surely in woman we will find the wisdom that eludes us! Sadly this is not the way things are.

One might find one human being [אָדָם, *ādām*] among a thousand who lives up to the purpose for which we are created, but Qohelet says she hasn't found a woman among them. We have higher expectations of woman, but Qohelet is declaring that this is foolish. She is not blaming anyone for this, but stating that this is the way things are. The result is that seeking to find meaning in man-woman partnership (pleasant as it can be) is vanity, a chasing after wind.

We are listening to Solomon reflect back over his life. Remember that tradition claimed it was his wives (700 plus 300 concubines, see 1Kings 11:3) that 'turned away his heart', and brought about his downfall.

Qohelet points out how much we invent along the way as we keep trying to account for the way things are (verse 29).

This is the only example of pēšer [פִּשְׁרָא, 'solution'] in the Hebrew Bible. In Biblical Aramaic it is usually associated with unravelling the meaning of dreams (see Daniel 2:45; 4:3; 5:15).

Qohelet is counselling us how to behave when faced with absolute power, whether divine or human. From the second part of verse 1 to the first part of verse 5, she refers to traditional 'wise' advice. Don't do anything to incur the disfavour of those in power. Do what you are ordered to do, and do it straightaway, and with as much grace as you can muster.

In verses 5-7 she makes the point that, important as it is to behave in the manner advised, it doesn't solve the problem of arbitrary power. A wise person knows there is a time for everything, including judgment. But a wise person should know that we cannot know when or how or what the judgment will be. That is the nature of power over which we have no control.

Verse 8 may be referring to our chasing the elusive wind [rûah]. Qohelet seems, however, to be saying that the human life-spirit (also rûah), is elusive.

The land-owners who are making life so difficult for people because of the power they wield, have no power over death.

The powerful used to put in substitutes to save them having to carry out personally their obligation to fight for their overlords. They can't do that when it comes to battling their own death!

Verse 9 sums up verses 1-8, and also prepares for verses 10-17 which reflect on the existence of inequities.

¹Who is so wise? And who knows the solution of anything?

Wisdom makes one's face shine, so that the hardness of one's countenance is changed. ²Keep the king's command but don't be hasty about oaths to God. ³Do not stand there overwhelmed by his presence. Go! Do not persist in behaviour that will harm you, for he will do whatever he pleases. ⁴For the word of the king is powerful, and who can say to him, "What are you doing?"

⁵Whoever obeys a command will meet no harm.

The wise heart knows that ⁶for every matter there is a time and judgment; that the troubles of humans lie heavy upon them; ⁷that no one knows what is going to happen; and that no one can tell them when it will happen.

⁸No one has power over the life-breath to detain it, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from the battle, nor does wickedness deliver those who practise it.

⁹All this I observed, when I applied my mind to all that is done under the sun, while one person exercises authority over another to the other's hurt.

Stop trying to make sense of things

¹⁰Then I saw the wicked being carried out for burial; and they came out from a holy place, while those who have acted justly are neglected in the city. This, too, is vanity.

¹¹Because sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the human heart is set on doing evil.

¹²Though sinners do the evil of hundreds, they live long lives.

I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who stand in fear before him, ¹³and it will not be well with the wicked, who will not prolong their shadowy days, because they do not stand in fear before God. ¹⁴Yet, even so, meaningless things take place on earth: there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.

¹⁵So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will accompany them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.

¹⁶When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, no matter how hard people try, sleeping neither day or night, ¹⁷I saw all the work of God, and concluded that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much people toil in seeking, they will not find the answer; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot work it out.

The wicked are being given an honourable burial with a funeral procession and all the appropriate rites, while the just are not properly interred. Qohelet's point is that we need to be sceptical of a 'success theology' that claims success for the just and failure for the unjust. The way things are doesn't make sense, but there's nothing we can do about it.

In verse 11 Qohelet points to the obvious lack of justice in the world. It makes one question God's justice and the value of living a moral life. People get away with doing evil, so what's to stop them continuing?

The first part of verse 12, and the whole of verse 14 are based on experience. It doesn't make sense, but the fact is that sinners can live long lives, and the righteous can end up suffering the punishment threatened to the wicked, and the wicked get the blessings promised to the just. You can't make sense of it.

This much is clear. So what is Qohelet affirming in the second part of verse 12, and in verse 13? She seems to be asserting that, in spite of the way things are, she knows that God is just. She can't justify this but she chooses to believe it, in spite of appearances.

In verse 15 Qohelet reiterates what she has said again and again: enjoy what you can.

In verses 16-17 she repeats the only conclusion we can come to if we examine the data honestly. It doesn't make sense. We can't work it out. So we should stop breaking our heads and our hearts over it.