

PART TWO

SECTION 2

ECCLESIASTES 9:1 – 12:8

¹All this I laid on my heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God, including both love and hate. People do not know everything that is before them.

²It is the same for everyone, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear carelessly are like those who revere an oath. ³This is the evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone.

So, too, the heart of human beings is full of evil; folly is in their hearts while they live, and after that they join the dead.

⁴Indeed, who is the one who chooses? There's only one thing the living are certain of, and that is death; and for the dead, the finality of the grave. But, a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no reward, and even the memory of them is lost. ⁶Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any portion in all that happens under the sun.

⁷Go, eat your bread with pleasure, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already favoured what you do.

⁸Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. ⁹Have pleasure with the woman you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

¹⁰All your hand finds to do with the strength you have, do it; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are headed.

In verse 1 Qohelet speaks, once again, of God. She is full of questions. The one truth that she never questions is that everything is 'in the hand of God'. In Semitic idiom to love is to choose; to hate is to not choose. God's choice is beyond our comprehension, and whatever our choices we are 'in the hand of God'. She goes on to state either that people don't know what's ahead of them, or that they don't know what is staring them in the face.

In verses 2-6 she asserts that there is one fate (death) for all (see Introduction pages 114-115). The good suffer the same fate as the evil. This is not good, but it is the way things are. The obvious lack of justice fills the heart with evil and folly, and afterwards there is death.

Traditional wisdom admonishes people to 'choose life that you may live' (Deuteronomy 30:19). But what's the use: we all die anyhow! We have no choice in the matter.

While this is so it is still better to be alive than to be dead. We might live a dog's life, but it is still better than being a dead lion!

In verses 7-10, Qohelet reiterates her constant advice: get pleasure out of life while you can. Life is passing. It doesn't make sense (it is 'vanity'), but it is God's gift, and the way things are is the way God wants things to be.

Death is final. Take whatever life you are given. Don't strive beyond the limits of your strength, but do what you can, and experience as much joy as you can while you are alive.

‘Under the sun’ everything is unpredictable. Things don’t turn out the way we think they should. Accidents happen. There are no guarantees (verses 11-12).

In verses 13-16, Qohelet goes on to tell a story to illustrate her point. There was wisdom in the besieged town that could have saved it, but, because of the wise person’s status no one thought to listen and the town was lost.

In principle one should heed the words of a wise person and not be over-impressed by the ranting of a person in whom power is vested (verse 17). The trouble is that, in reality, as has been illustrated in the story (verses 13-16), we tend not to listen when wisdom comes from an unexpected quarter.

Likewise, it may generally be true that wisdom is better than weapons of war, but we tend to listen to the loudest voice, and so much good remains undone (verse 18).

She illustrates this truth with a proverb (chapter 10, verse 1).

Wisdom and folly are not the same (verse 2). It’s not that difficult to pick a fool (verse 3).

Qohelet concludes by counselling calm, in the sense of a calm composure, but also in the sense of a soothing presence for others that might avert a dangerous situation. You might be right, but don’t push it when faced with someone in a position of power.

¹¹Again I observed that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. ¹²For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so human beings are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.

¹³This, too, I have observed about wisdom under the sun, and I regard it assignificant. ¹⁴There was a little town with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it.

¹⁵Now there was found in it a wise commoner, and he by his wisdom might have delivered the town, but no one gave thought to that commoner.

¹⁶So I thought, “Wisdom is better than might; yet the commoner’s wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded.”

¹⁷The calm words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

¹⁸Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one bungler destroys much good.

^{10:1} A fly that dies make the perfumer’s ointment give off a foul odour; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour. ²The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of a fool to the left. ³Even when fools walk on the road, they lack sense, and show to everyone that they are fools.

⁴If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post, for calmness will allay great offenses.

⁵There is an evil that I have observed under the sun, as great an error as stems from a property owner: ⁶a fool is set in high places, but the rich sit in a low place. ⁷I have seen slaves on horseback, and princes walking on foot like slaves.

⁸Whoever digs a pit may fall into it; and whoever breaks down a wall may be bitten by a snake. ⁹Whoever quarries stones may be hurt by them; and whoever splits logs may be endangered by them.

¹⁰If an implement is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, then more strength must be exerted. Wisdom helps one to succeed.

¹¹If a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage in a charmer.

¹²Words spoken by the wise bring favour, but the lips of fools consume them. ¹³The words of their mouths begin in foolishness, and their talk ends in wicked madness. ¹⁴Yet fools talk on and on. No one knows what is to happen, and who can tell anyone what the future holds? ¹⁵The toil of fools wears them out, for they do not even know the way to town.

As noted in the Introduction (page 112) the system of property ownership during the years of Persian rule led to many injustices.

Incompetent people are being promoted, with the result that those who thought they were on the way to riches have ended up ‘in a low place’ (verse 6).

As noted in the Introduction (pages 111-113), Ecclesiastes was written in a community with poor leadership, an economy in turmoil, and a failure of law and order.

Verses 8-11 illustrate how precarious things are. Qohelet lists common examples of occupational hazards. Everywhere there are risks. One obvious thing we can do is check that our implements are appropriate for the task in hand (verse 10). This can help reduce the risks. But it can’t eliminate them. If you are worried about a snake, get someone in who is an expert in incantations. However, there is every chance the snake might strike before the expert arrives (verse 11).

It is clear from verses 12-15 that Qohelet sees no value in folly. We should be as ‘wise’ as we can in every sphere of life, including the practical matters she has just listed. However, we fool ourselves if we think that being wise guarantees success, or can bring us to understand our existence.

In verses 16-20 Qohelet speaks of risks in the political field, and has some advice on how to manage them.

Verses 16-17 echo earlier comments about the prevailing social upheaval (see 10:6-7). Things are especially hard when incompetent people are in positions of power, or when those in power are only interested in living it up.

This criticism is continued in verses 18-19 by the subtle use of proverbial sayings. The 'house' is the dynasty, or the body politic. In the same way verse 19 may be intended as criticism of those who are preoccupied in feasting, drinking and making money, while having no care for the community they are meant to serve.

That these verses are intended to be critical of those who exercise power is indicated by the conclusion drawn in verse 20. Qohelet has camouflaged her criticism in apparently harmless wisdom sayings, but she realises that even this is risky.

From ancient sources we know that the Persian Empire was an ant bed of spies, who were an essential element in the extraction of taxes, and also a means of avoiding open sedition. They were known as 'the king's ears'. Qohelet's advice is simple: watch your words, even in the company of trusted friends. Anything you say is likely to get back to those who can make life difficult for you.

¹⁶Alas for you, O land, when your king is an immature youth, and your princes carouse in the morning!

¹⁷Happy are you, O land, when your king is noble, and your princes feast at the proper time – in a way that befits a man, and not to get drunk!

¹⁸Through sloth the roof collapses, and through indolence the house leaks.

¹⁹Feasts are made for laughter; wine gladdens life, and money makes all things possible.

²⁰Do not speak ill of the king, even among your intimates, or of the rich, even in your bedroom; for a bird of the sky may carry your voice, or some winged creature report the matter.

¹Release your bread upon the waters; in the course of time you may get it back.

²Give a portion seven ways, or even eight; you do not know what disaster may happen upon the land.

³If clouds become full, they empty rain on the earth; whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. ⁴Whoever watches the wind will not sow; and whoever watches the clouds will not reap.

⁵Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the fetus in the mother's womb, so you do not know the action of God, the one who makes everything happen.

⁶In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

Verses 1-6 deal with risks in the economic field. In verse 1, Qohelet calls for liberality. Don't hoard. Take risks even though you don't know what is going to happen. You may never reap any benefit from your generosity, but you may.

This is reinforced in verse 2. Uncertainty about the future does not justify hoarding. Be generous (you could lose it all anyhow!)

In verse 3 Qohelet speaks of the inevitability of the processes of nature. However they remain unpredictable and uncontrollable. So, as verse 4 emphasises, if we wait till we are sure how and when nature is going to act, we'll never do anything.

In verse 5 she makes the point that even in an area that concerns the beginning of human existence we don't know how nature works. As she has just observed (verse 3), when the clouds are full we know that it is going to rain somewhere, sometime. So we can see that a pregnant woman is going to give birth, but we don't know how the life-breath comes to the fetus.

The final words of verse 5 state more clearly than anywhere in Ecclesiastes, the understanding that is the foundation of everything Qohelet has to say: 'God is the One who makes everything happen', and the ways of God are beyond our comprehension.

What we can do is get on with living, do what seems appropriate, don't waste our life, but don't live expecting to know how things will turn out. Get on with it. Some good may come of it. If it does it is from 'God the one who makes everything happen'.

Verses 7-10 are a call to get pleasure out of life while you can, before everything grinds to a halt (12:1-8).

‘To see the sun’(verse 7) means ‘to be alive’. Calling to mind the fact that there will be hard times can take away from the enjoyment of the present (see 5:19); but it can also highlight the need to enjoy life while one can. ‘Days of darkness’(verse 8) is not referring to death, but to hard times (compare 5:16). We have no control over the future, and everything is passing, lacking substance, like a puff of wind. It will be the same for ‘all that comes’: all future generations.

The advice given in verses 9-10 recalls Qohelet’s earlier words (2:1-3). When she tells us to ‘follow the inclinations of your heart and the desires of your eyes’, she is not speaking of how one should make ethical decisions. She is advising people to listen to their heart and enjoy themselves. The reference to God’s judgment may be intended as a warning: enjoy yourself, but remember that God is judging you, so don’t think that what you do doesn’t matter. Or (and in the context this appears more likely) it may be reinforcing the point just made: if God gives you joy God expects you to be joyful.

Verse 10 advises that we try to avoid pain. The time will come when we are no longer young, and cannot avoid it. There is also the suggestion that it is absurd to see in youth the answer to our longings. Youth, like everything else under the sun, is ephemeral: here and then gone forever.

⁷Light is pleasant, and it is delightful for the eyes to see the sun.

⁸If one should live many years, one should rejoice in them all, and remember that the days of darkness are many. All that comes is vanity.

⁹Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, and know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.

¹⁰Banish anxiety from your heart, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are fleeting.

Remember your creator

12:1 Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them";

Qohelet concludes with a challenge to the young: 'Remember your Creator'. The following reflections are inspired by Jacques Ellul (op.cit. pages 278-283).

All God asks is that we do not treat him like an archive piece, like an amazing all-powerful being who did wonderful things long ago, back then in the early days of our people. Qohelet calls us to remember our Creator now, and while life is opening up before us.

For the first time, Qohelet calls God by a name other than simply 'God'. She names him 'Creator'. While we are young she challenges us to remember that we are not the Creator. All we are and all we have is gift. We are totally dependent on God. We are not the Master of creation, free to do what we like. Like everything around us we are a creature, and it is our relationship with our Creator that defines us and gives us our identity.

The whole of Ecclesiastes has insisted that all this is beyond our comprehension. It is foolish not to acknowledge this. It is foolish, too, to forget it or to fail to consider it as we emerge into adult life. We are free, but we are not independent or autonomous. We must not deceive ourselves by thinking that we create anything. God, and God alone, is the Creator. If anything we do has value (and is not just a waste of time and energy) it is because we are acting as God's instruments. All the evils in our world stem from our forgetting this.

It is important for this awareness to come during the time of our youth. It will give direction to our blossoming energy and joy, for it will keep us connected to our Creator. It is never too late to remember God, but if we do not remember him in our youth, and only turn to him in our declining years, there is a danger that this 'God' to whom we turn will be little more than a crutch, and idol, our last resort, rather than our hope.

It is important that we remember our Creator when our life is still opening up before us, so that we will, in the words of Jesus, 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10). God's gift is that our lives be productive – something that can happen only when we live within the stream of God's creative action. What a tragedy if we remember God only out of regret for a wasted life! As we heard in an earlier poem: 'There is for everything a moment, and a time for every matter under heaven'(3:1). Youth is the time to remember our Creator. This is true also for the beginnings (the 'youth') of all our projects, lest, by not remembering we waste our life and our energy.

Qohelet concludes with a remarkable poem. The images are suggestive of the inevitable coming of old age, which Qohelet uses as a symbol of the inevitable decline of all things. It is this that is the reason for everything being, ultimately, without substantial meaning: ‘all is vanity’.

The imagery in verses 2-4 needs little commentary. The reference to birds in verse 4 is probably meant to evoke the sound of the increasingly ominous cry of birds associated with mourning (see Micah 1:8) as they (the ‘daughters of song’) swoop down, having seen ‘from on high’ the terror of a community facing death.

The images of the almond tree, the locust and the caper in verse 5 depict the languishing of vegetation (compare Isaiah 34:4). In the context Qohelet seems to be saying that the normally attractive almond tree has rotted and lost its attraction. There is a close resemblance between the verb ‘makes one turn away’ [יָנֵס, yān’ēš] and the verb ‘blooms’ [יָנֵס, yānēš]. The blossom of the almond is white. Qohelet is taking an image that is a symbol of the white hair of old age, and playing with the word to give it a darker nuance. The word translated ‘locust’ can refer to the grasshopper. It is used also for certain kinds of plants (including the carob tree), the pods of which resemble a locust. The caper bush, too, has dried up.

The ‘eternal home’ of verse 5 is the grave. The ‘silver tendril’ (verse 6) is probably a reference to a lamp stand shaped in the form of a tree (compare Zechariah 4:2). The ‘golden bowl’ held the oil. Life is snuffed out (compare 2Samuel 21:17). The shattering of pots may have been a funerary custom, symbolising the breaking of the connection between a person and life. The divine potter has broken the clay vessel. The life-breath given by God (see Genesis 2:7; 3:19) goes back to God.

Qohelet concludes with the phrase with which she began (see 1:2). Everything under the sun is passing. Everything is beyond human control. Nothing lasts. ‘All is vanity’.

²before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened, and the clouds return after the rain; ³on the day when those who watch the house tremble, and strong men cower, and those who grind cease working because they are too few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; ⁴when the doors onto the street are shut, and the sound of the mill grows silent; when one rises to the sound of the sparrow, and the song birds swoop low – ⁵even from on high they see terror on the way;

when the almond tree makes one turn away, the locust droops, and the caper fails; for all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners process in the streets;

⁶before the silver tendril is smashed, or the golden bowl is shattered, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the pulley at the cistern rusts;

⁷before dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.

⁸Vanity of vanities, says Qohelet. All is vanity!

