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**Core Seminar**

**Old Testament**

**Class 14: Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs**

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**Introduction**

Welcome to the second half of the Old Testament class! So far we’ve worked our way through Israel’s history up through David and then side-stepped into the wisdom literature: Job, Psalms, and Proverbs. This morning, we finish up the wisdom literature with Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs before we get back to the historical books.

As we get into these books, let me frame how you should think of them. In many ways, these books function as commentary on Genesis 1, 2, and 3. Like Proverbs, the Song of Songs is a “how to” manual for the creation mandate Adam and Eve were given in Genesis 1 and 2. But whereas Proverbs focuses on the command to work and care for the Garden—wisdom for our “day jobs” within God’s kingdom, so to speak, the Song of Songs focuses on the other side, being fruitful. In many ways, the Song of Songs is all about Genesis 2:25—“the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” What does that union look like? Read the Song of Songs.

Now, if Proverbs and the Song of Songs in general give us wisdom for operating in the world that should be, the world of Genesis 2, Ecclesiastes is primarily commentary on the world of Genesis 3. The world of the fall. What does it look like to search for meaning in a world wracked by sin? That’s Ecclesiastes.

For both books, it’s easy to get lost in the twists and turns and miss the main message. That’s why they’re often mined for pithy quotes but rarely understood as whole books. So our goal is to understand the main point each book is making. We’ll begin with Ecclesiastes.

**ECCLESIASTES**

**Introducing Qohelet and His Book**

The first verse of Ecclesiastes tells us that the book consists of “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Many have taken this to be Solomon, but the book doesn’t say so explicitly. Throughout the book, the author refers to himself as “the Preacher” or “the Teacher.” The Hebrew word is *Qohelet* (pronounced like “go YELL it”). It means one who gathers or assembles, and it probably refers to one who held a public teaching office.

So what did Qohelet teach? Not what he learned from books or from wise men before him. Instead, the book of Ecclesiastes takes us on a journey. Strikingly, much of Ecclesiastes consists in Qohelet’s observations on life—his own life and others’. In fact, a crucial key for understanding Ecclesiastes is that throughout the book, Qohelet alternates between reporting what he observes and confessing what he knows by faith.

For instance, much of chapters 1 and 2 reports his experiences and observations, as he sought to enjoy pleasure to the full. Only at the end of chapter 2, in verses 24 to 26, does Qohelet bring God into the picture.

Qohelet repeatedly returns to the same subjects: work, wealth, wisdom, pleasure. And he considers those topics from perspectives that are so different they can seem contradictory. On the one hand, all these things are fleeting, uncontrollable, ungraspable. But on the other hand, they’re all good gifts from God that we should enjoy. How can both of those things be true? Because both Genesis 1–2 and Genesis 3 are true. This world is a good gift, given by God, and it is *also* cursed to futility because of sin. But futility and curse are not the end of the story: everyone will one day give account to God, our Creator and judge.

So, we can approach the message of Ecclesiastes like a three-story building.[[1]](#footnote-1) Each story shows us something true, and the higher we ascend, the farther we see.

**1. First floor: Everything is vanity.**

This is the thesis that opens and closes the book, stated in 1:2 and echoed in 12:8, “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” The Hebrew word translated “vanity” is *hevel* (pronounced like “level”). Its basic meaning is breath or vapor. It describes something weightless, fleeting, and prone to vanish. Qohelet draws out many metaphorical meanings of *hevel*.

* In Ecclesiastes 11:10 he says that “youth and the dawn of life are *hevel*,” meaning they’re fleeting, they won’t last.
* In 2:21 he says that sometimes a wise, hard-working person will have to leave their whole legacy to someone who neither worked for it nor deserves it. This is *hevel* in that we’re not in control, and life often doesn’t make sense.
* In 8:14 he points out that some righteous people get treated as if they’re wicked, and some wicked are treated as if they’re righteous. Picture a crooked crime kingpin prospering into old age on the one hand, and on the other hand a faithful, humble servant of the Lord dying tragically in their 20s. “I said that this also is *hevel*.” Why? Because it doesn’t make any sense. It doesn’t fit any of our expectations or desires. Life doesn’t do what we want; life doesn’t do what it should.

The thesis that everything is *hevel* is developed with laser-sharp focus in the first three chapters. In chapter 1, verse 3 Qohelet asks, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” The expected answer is, “Nothing.” In the end, when all is said and done, you can take nothing with you. When the accounts of this life are settled, you don’t get to bring any profit with you into the grave.

Qohelet then illustrates this point with a beautiful poem that observes natures ceaseless cycles. Verse 4, “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.” People are shaped from dust, and then return to dust, and the dust simply gets recycled. Verse 4, “The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.” For all its effort, the sun doesn’t get anywhere. It always has to return to the starting line.

Qohelet’s point is that human life is like these natural cycles: no matter how hard we work, we always get returned to the starting line. No matter how much we amass for ourselves, death will take it all.

Then, from chapter 1 verse 12 through chapter 2 verse 26, Qohelet tells us that he undertook to examine all of human life. He studied and observed and considered and immersed himself in the whole range of human experience. Everywhere he looked, he looked for meaning, purpose, significance, coherence. Does all this mean anything? Here’s his conclusion in advance, in chapter 1 verses 13 and 14:

And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

What did Qohelet see? First, he saw the limits of wisdom. Qohelet strived to amass more wisdom than anyone before him. But the more he learned, the worse life looked. Wisdom offered him knowledge without control, which just made the pain worse. Chapter 1 verse 18: “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”

If wisdom left him gloomy, what about pleasure? Qohelet next attempted to live life to the full. Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 tells us he immersed himself in work, wealth, food, music, and every kind of enjoyment. Can I have someone read those verses? [Get volunteer.]

I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Qohelet measured the depth of pleasure by diving in again and again. And every time, he hit bottom and came up with a bruised skull. He couldn’t find what he was looking for in any pleasure, no matter how sophisticated, because pleasure too is vanity.

Why are all earthly satisfactions fleeting and prone to vanish? One reason is death. After observing the corruption of justice in the courts, Qohelet concludes in chapter 3, verses 18 to 20,

I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. . . . All are from dust, and to dust all return.

No pleasure lasts, because no source of pleasure lasts. But another reason why earthly satisfactions don’t finally satisfy is that our hearts innately long for more than this world can offer. Who put that desire for more in our hearts? God himself. Qohelet confesses in 3:11, “He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” God has put into our hearts a desire for infinite satisfaction, and that’s a desire that only he can satisfy.

Throughout Ecclesiastes, when Qohelet pronounces that everything is *hevel*, he is looking at all of life through the lens of Genesis 3. In response to our sin, God cursed the world. He covered everything with a shroud of mortality and futility. And that’s a true lens on the world. It’s a lens we’re tempted to ignore because we don’t like what it shows. We need Qohelet’s help in learning to look at our lives through this lens, so that we don’t invest this-worldly goods with otherworldly hopes. But this isn’t the only lens we need to look through.

**2. Second floor: Everything is a gift from God.**

Qohelet doesn’t just look at the world through the lens of Genesis 3. He also looks through the lens of Genesis 1 and 2. When he looks through Genesis 3, his thinking is observational, even empirical. He tells us what he sees and draws conclusions from it. But when he looks at the world through Genesis 1 and 2, his thinking is confessional; he’s declaring what he knows to be true because God is Creator and ruler.

Everything isn’t just fleeting and absurd; everything is also a gift from God. That everything is a gift doesn’t make it any less fleeting; that everything is fleeting doesn’t make it any less a gift. Throughout the book, Qohelet repeatedly urges us to enjoy every good thing in life, receiving them all as good gifts from a good God. Consider 2:24–26,

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Throughout Qohelet’s story of his journey in 1:12 to 2:23, he mentions himself dozens of times, telling us what he saw and did and learned and concluded. But he doesn’t mention God once. Only when he gets to chapter 2 verse 24 does he mention God, and that changes everything. Why? Because he’s no longer trying to find out what we can *gain* from the world. He’s no longer trying to see if we can extract some profit or pleasure that we can keep for ourselves forever. Instead, he looks at all of life through a lens of faith in God as the good Creator. And he discovers that, since everything God created is a gift, we should enjoy all of it. He returns to this theme several times, including chapter 5, verses 18 to 20:

Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

If everything is a gift, then everything is here for us to enjoy. No matter how many frustrations it brings, enjoy the work God has given you. No matter how fleeting they may be, enjoy the material blessings God has given you. If you’re married, no matter the challenges marriage might bring, enjoy it as a delightful gift from a wise and generous God.

A gift must be received with open hands. So the key to enjoying God’s gifts is to keep your hands open. You can’t control them. You can’t squeeze them for more pleasure than they’re meant to give. If you try to clamp down on them and make them perfect and permanent pleasures, you’ll crush them. Only an attitude of humble, thankful *receiving* can enable you to enjoy God’s gifts as you should.

So, by climbing a little higher, we’ve seen a little further. The things of this world are not only frustrating and fleeting; they’re also divinely designed delights. But we need to climb one floor higher, and the next floor scratches the heavens.

**3. Third Floor: Everything has eternal significance, because everyone will answer to God.**

Ecclesiastes is primarily focused on the here-and-now, but in a couple places the light of eternity breaks through. For instance, chapter 11 verse 9 teaches us to lift our eyes from the things of this world to their eternal consequences: “Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.”

Qohelet exhorts young people to enjoy all the good things that God sets before them, but to do so in wisdom. Why? Because we will all answer to God for the use we have made of his gifts. Our time will soon run out. And when it does, we will all have to tell God how we’ve used it.

At the very end of the book, Ecclesiastes sums up its message like this, in chapter 12 verses 13 and 14: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

Because everything is fleeting, we shouldn’t fix our ultimate hope, or give our ultimate allegiance, to any earthly good. And because everything is a good gift, we should fix our ultimate hope on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. That’s at the heart of what it means to fear God and keep his commandments.

So, Ecclesiastes’ three-story building also draws an outline of our need for Christ. None of us can deliver ourselves from death’s futility. None of us can undo the effects of the curse in our lives. None of us can live in our own strength in a way that will pass God’s final exam. But Jesus, and only Jesus, has done all that for us.

**[TAKE QUESTIONS]**

**THE SONG OF SOLOMON**

**Context**

So that’s Ecclesiastes. Let’s turn now to The Song of Solomon. Once again, there’s no immediate historical context that we need to be aware of. But the book does have some important redemptive-historical context. There’s a bit of a reenactment and inversion of Genesis 2 and 3 going on in the book. What I mean is that the beautiful relationship in the Garden of Eden between Adam and Eve was intended for God’s glory and their good. Now, this side of the fall, men and women are still to relate to each other in marriage, sexually, according to God’s perfect plan. If they do, it will again be to His glory and their good. That is, *really* to their good. But if they don’t, they will experience more of the same consequences that Adam and Eve did in Genesis 3: God will not be glorified and men and women will harm themselves and each other.

And beyond the immediate context of marriage, there’s something else going on. As Stephen Dempster has written in *Dominion and Dynasty*, “Shorn of its literary context, the song could be almost pornographic. But the context of the canon both restricts the meaning to the context of marriage and expands it to include the relationship between Yahweh and Israel.” (p. 207) This is a book about marriage. Pure and simple. But what *is* marriage? The Old Testament prophets used marriage as an image of God’s relationship with his covenant people Israel. Like Ecclesiastes, the Song was placed with the post-exilic literature in the Hebrew bible. Presumably, those editors put it there for a reason. Even in the judgment of exile, God was providing a passionate and profound—even graphic—reminder of his love and faithfulness for his people. Think of Isaiah 62: “As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.” (v. 5b) That’s the other side of this Song.

So this book is at the same time commentary on what it looks like for the man and women to be “naked and not ashamed” and a celebration of God’s love for us.

**Theme**

We can summarize the Song of Solomon like this:

*The Song of Solomon sings of the son of David, who is the ideal king of Israel, who is the seed of the woman, seed of the Abraham, seed of Judah, seed of David, who enjoys uninhibited, unashamed intimacy with his beloved, in a garden that belongs to him.*

Being created in God’s image meant being created male and female. They were to image God’s glory through a harmonious and pure sexual relationship. Well, with the entrance of sin, it all fell apart. Now, after the fall, even with sinful natures, men and women are called to monogamy and sexual purity. This book extols the beauty and worth of living in such a relationship, and warns us not to create our own sexual agenda.

The book in many ways reads like a Shakespearian romance drama: the betrothed young woman and her beloved singing praises to each other about how fair and beautiful they each are; then they get married and live happily ever after. Unlike Shakespeare, there’s no murder and no one commits suicide.

The Song is split into three basic sections. The courtship, through 3:5. The wedding ceremony and consummation, through 5:1. And the marriage, through the end of chapter 8.

First, the courtship, whose theme is patience. Look at chapter 2, verse 7: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.” The context to these verses is that the young woman and the young man aren’t yet married, and the young woman expresses her desire to remain chaste until the right time. And she calls other woman to the same resolve. She is saying, don’t rush what you think love is and what loving acts are, until the time is right. Then, in marriage, the sex will be beautiful, honoring to God, and healthy for the relationship. Prior to that, it will only reap disaster. These words are repeated in chapter 3, verse 5. This verse is actually the last words before the wedding in verse 6. So right up to the very end of singlehood, patience is extolled, and urged upon us all.

But then we come to the wedding itself in the rest of chapter 3, and a beautiful description of sex and sexuality in chapter 4, leading up to a final comment in chapter 5, verse 1. “Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love!” Many who have studied this think that this is the voice of God. God is now putting His blessing on their sexual relationship. Sex isn’t just a dirty little necessity for the production of children, but a good and beautiful and God-honoring act between a married man and woman. Sex, just like marriage, was created by God for His glory and for His creatures’ good and health. And this book celebrates that fact.

Well, then, for the rest of the book, we see this couple’s married life. And in **8:4**, the refrain is heard again. “[Do not] stir up or awaken love until it pleases.” The married woman continues to plead with the young to be wise and wait for marriage, and not make a mess of things because they couldn’t wait.

I mentioned earlier that the book is meant to be understood as an inversion of part of the fall into sin. When Adam and Eve fell into sin there were a number of consequences. One of them was that now their marriage relationship would be strained. No longer would it be harmonious and agreeable. Instead, the woman would desire to control the man and the man would abuse his authority and dominate her. With the introduction of sin, “to have and to hold” has turned into “to use and to dominate.” Selfishness, on both sides, will raise its head and control both of them.

But it doesn’t have to be so. In that sense, sex in marriage is perhaps one of the purest visions we have of heaven, when all things will be restored to their Edenic glory, and beyond. Look at chapter 7, verse 10. “I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me.” That’s the self-giving love of Genesis 2, not the self-serving relationships of Genesis 3. Marriage as it ought to be. The woman is not seeking to control, and in turn being exploited by, the man. Instead the man is filling his creation role of loving leadership and desiring his wife.

**Conclusion**

From The Song of Solomon, we learn that marriage and sex occupy a very high place in God’s economy. Therefore, as His creatures, it’s imperative to keep the marriage bed pure: for unmarried persons to abstain from sex and married couples to love each other with it. If we abuse these gifts God has given us, disaster and frustration will be the only result, just as it was with the first sin in the garden.

And so this book is a wonderful guide to relationship and sex in marriage. But it’s also a beautiful description of God’s love for us, the passion of which can only be described by the passion in a marriage. This is the perfect marriage. And it is the love that God has for you. So whether or not you’re married, read this book with both of these in mind. This is a real marriage. And real marriage is a picture of God’s love for us in Christ. This is how much God has loved you.

1. This interpretation of Ecclesiastes as a three-story building is drawn from, and developed more fully in, Bobby Jamieson, *Everything Is Never Enough: Happiness According to Ecclesiastes* (forthcoming; working title). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)