

Ecclesiastes: Preacher of Surprising Joy

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What is hebel?

In terms of economic activity

- work and someone else gets it – uncertainty and ??? (2:18-23)
- work and lose it suddenly – volatility and uncertainty (5:10, 13-17)
- work and never enjoy it - ??? ambition? (6:1-6)
- work and are never satisfied – envy and loss of *vocation* (4:4-8)

What is hebel?

In terms of society

- no one to advocate on behalf of the poor (4:1-2)
- difficult to care for the poor – bureaucracy and diffusion of responsibility (5:8-9)
- righteous called wicked and wicked called righteous – loss of moral sense (8:10, 14)
- work only for ourselves – society of individuals (4:7-8)
- those with power abuse it (8:9)

What is hebel?

In terms of knowledge

- wisdom makes no ultimate difference – death? (2:12-17)
- we do not know what God is doing – inscrutable (3:11, 8:17)
- we cannot change what God is doing – sovereign (3:14-15)
- we do not know the future (8:6-7, 9:12)

What is hebel?

In terms of righteousness

- righteous suffer and wicked prosper (8:10)
- righteous and wicked share same ultimate fate – (9:1-3)
- extreme righteousness is arrogant and destructive – (8:15-16)
- everyone has evil in their heart / no one is without sin – (9:3)

We are finite

- (Ultimate) futility of human effort*
- (Ultimate) futility of human knowledge*
- (Ultimate) futility of human righteousness*
- We do not know the future
- We cannot know or change what God is doing
- Everybody dies*
- *What exactly is the problem? Only death? What does Qohelet mean there is no “advantage”?

Where we are (Seow)

1:1 Superscription

PART I

1A. Reflection. Everything is Ephemeral and Unreliable.

1B. **Ethic. Coping with uncertainty.**

PART II

IIA. Reflection. Everything is elusive.

IIB. **Ethic. Coping with risks and death.**

12:9-13 Epilogue

12:13-14 Additional material (added later?)

So now what?

- What is the gospel of Ecclesiastes?
- Is there a gospel of Ecclesiastes?
- “Qohelet whittles life down to its bare essentials. And those are cause for joy and basic sustenance”
 - William Brown, *Character in Crisis*
- Gospel of Ecclesiastes = **Joy**
- Are you kidding?!? Finitude mortality futility death...
joy?!?
- Do we look for joy in all the wrong places?

Where is joy?

- Eccl 2:24-26
 - eat drink and find joy in their *work*
 - *work not as a means to an end but a source of joy in itself
- Eccl 3:12-13
 - eat drink and receive joy in all their *work*
 - glory of the ordinary
 - comes from God
- Eccl 3:9-12
 - companionship
 - live and work in relationship with others
 - is this where joy in work comes from?

Where is joy?

- Eccl 5:18-20
 - eat drink find joy in their work
 - this is what God gives us
 - enjoy wealth and possessions – enjoy what you *have*
- Eccl 8:15
 - eat drink and enjoy
 - this will carry you through the work that you do

Where is joy?

- Eccl 9:7-10
 - eat drink and enjoy
 - enjoy your wife (family and friends)
 - work *hard*
 - take life as it comes
 - life itself is a valuable gift

Where is joy?

- Eccl 11:7-12:1a
 - enjoy life when you are young
 - let kids be kids
 - not just about *youth* but what youth represents
 - follow your passion
 - not just for the young
 - surprising and controversial – wisdom literature usually emphasizes wisdom of old age

Receive the present

- Carpe diem
 - Seize the day
- Eat drink and be merry
 - Not expression of despair but of **joy**
- Receive with gratitude what God gives in the present moment

Receive the present

- Mind is broken – lives in fear and despair
 - Meletios Webber, *Bread and Water*
- “The mind rejects the here and now. This combines with an undercurrent of negativity or dissatisfaction with a sense that the reality of God's world is not good enough. Indeed, the motto of the mind, if it had one, might very well be, '**Anywhere but here; any moment but now.**' It lives in an environment of constant complaint and discomfort.”

The present is all we have

When the mind looks at the present moment, it sees nothing, or at least nothing worth considering. The mind prefers to work in the past or future, since these dimensions are both actually constructs of the mind's own workings and thus the mind controls them. The present moment, however, is completely outside its control and therefore ignored.

The present moment is the only moment that is, in any sense, real. Moreover, in spiritual terms, the present moment is the only possible occasion in which we can meet God (or anyone else).

The heart is quiet rather than noise, intuitive rather than deductive, **lives entirely in the present, and is, at every moment, accepting of the reality God gives in that moment.**" (Webber, 19-20, 25)

Juicy quotes

Enjoyment is considered a gift rather than an achievement, and thus is to be received in gratitude. Indeed, enjoyment [RW: or *joy* < Hebrew *simchah*] is God's gift to human beings.... Enjoyment, Qoheleth observes, has a mysteriously incidental quality to it, since it lies outside the domain of human achievement and design.... When and to whom the breezes of enjoyment blow, no human being can determine. All the more reason to enjoy it. (137)

Qoheleth urges a total, personal investment in one's effort [see Eccl 9:10]... There is no work or even consciousness after death. So nothing less than the vitality of life breathes through the strain and rigor of everyday work, providing in the end sustenance and enjoyment.... Work conducted as a secure means to a gainful end will inevitably lead to frustration and despair. But viewed as an end in itself, work does have its rewards, first and foremost enjoyment. Indeed, enjoyment can accompany one's work at every step (8:15). (138)

Juicy quotes

Futile labor for Qoheleth is infused with an overwhelming sense of acceptance of one's lot in life that allows a person to cherish the few brief moments of rest... The duration and quality of the rest are determined by God and are received in gratitude. Rest and sustenance are integral parts of the daily rhythm of work, which has its own internal rewards. (139)

[Qoheleth] is a book on joyful perseverance. He is a preacher of joy, of joy found through hard work and rest. Do not count on what can be achieved, he seems to say. Rather keep on working, keep working under the sun, keep crying out for justice and right relationships, keep ministering to others, and do it all for all you're worth. Feel the breeze when it comes, accepting the fellowship of others. Then let the chips fall where they may. For wherever they fall, God's mercy is to be found. (150)

Several questions

- ✓ How much does our social-economic system enable people to find joy in ?
- ✓ How much does our social-economic system enable people to find joy in the rhythm of work and rest?
- ✓ How much do we have control over finding joy in work? (as employees or employers)
- ✓ How and when did you find joy in work?
- ✓ How and when did you or do you find joy?
- ✓ Qohelet seems to say this is all out of our control – gift of God we receive with gratitude
- ✓ If receiving joy in the present moment comes from God – is this how God is immanent in the book of Ecclesiastes?