

Faith Pulpit

Encouraging the Pursuit of Joy

In the preceding article Prof. Little presented his conclusion that Qoheleth did not have a cynical view of life but rather was a wise, godly man who encouraged the pursuit of joy in the midst of the vanities of life. “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God” (2:24).¹) This text is the first of seven passages explaining how one should live in light of the vanity in this world.² In this article Prof. Little interprets three passages in light of this framework.

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God. I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him. That which is has already been, and what is to be has already been; and God requires an account of what is past

(Ecclesiastes. 3:12–15).

Ecclesiastes 3 is perhaps the most well-known passage in the book. “To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven” (3:1). The wise man was responsible to do the right thing at the right time. The problem, however, was that Qoheleth could not do it. Though he was a wise man, he recognized he still made mistakes. Only God knows the right thing to do at all times. Qoheleth realized this truth and stated that, “no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end” (3:11). Qoheleth’s thoughts concerning the poem on time (3:2–8) espoused an orthodox theology that exalted God.

How then should one respond in light of the futility of never knowing the right time to do the right deed? Should he wallow in despair and frustration? No. He should enjoy life! Who allows one to enjoy life? God does. “I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their

lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God” (3:12, 13).

Qoheleth added another thought in 3:14 and 15 to help man not despair because of the vanities of life. God is sovereign! “I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him. That which is has already been, and what is to be has already been; and God requires an account of what is past.” Man can enjoy life by looking away from the vanities of life and looking to God as the sovereign ruler of all things. In these two passages Qoheleth again presented an orthodox response to a vain and futile situation.

Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—this is the gift of God. For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart (Ecclesiastes 5:18–20).

Scholars debate the construction of Ecclesiastes 5. Some see the text building up to the joy statements in 5:18–20 and then chapter 6 starts a new section. Others understand 5:10—6:9 to be a chiasm with 5:18–20 at the center. Both structures of this text recognize the primacy of the joy statements in 5:18–20.

The entire section from 5:10—6:9 is a discussion of wealth and poverty. The similar content of this section suggests a chiastic structure. Thomas Krüger presents this chiastic outline.³

- a. Proverbs on wealth (5:10–12)
- b. Negative examples of wealth (5:13–17)
- c. Positive examples of wealth (5:18–20)
 - b1. Negative examples of wealth (6:1–6)
 - a1. Proverbs on wealth (6:7–9)

The positive examples of wealth with their exhortation to enjoy life are contrasted with the negative examples preceding and following them. 5:10–12 and 6:7–9 each contain three proverbs that evidence the limitations of wealth. 5:13–17 and 6:1–6 give examples of how the rich and the poor do not enjoy life. The text climaxes in the center (5:18–20) where Qoheleth gave advice to both the poor (18) and the rich (19) concerning how to enjoy life in view of its vanities.

The answer, again, is to enjoy the portion (???) God has given. The emphasis on joy is greater here than in any other passage in the book. Whether a person has much or little, the answer isn’t wealth—it

is contentment with the gifts God has given. For the poor, God's gift is eating, drinking, and enjoying one's labor as described in verse 18. For the rich, God's gift is the ability to consume one's wealth as explained in verse 19.

The capstone comes in 5:20. Here an individual is described as someone who is so preoccupied with the gifts of God that he does not even recognize the vanity around him. This individual accepts life for what it is and chooses to enjoy the gifts that God gives him. Choon-Leong Seow agrees when he writes, "Perhaps Qohelet means to say that one ought not think about the days of one's life because God is giving one a preoccupation through the pleasures of the heart. That is, God has made it possible to forget one's ephemeral life (see also 6:12; 9:9) through the enjoyment of life."⁴

This passage with its chiastic structure reinforces the view that people should enjoy life in spite of its vanities.

So I commended enjoyment, because a man has nothing better under the sun than to eat, drink, and be merry; for this will remain with him in his labor for the days of his life which God gives him under the sun (Ecclesiastes 8:15).

Ecclesiastes 8:15 concludes the section started in 6:10. In 6:11 Qoheleth asked the question, "How is man the better??" This question is similar to the thematic question in 1:3: "What profit has a man from all his labor?" The two Hebrew words are cognates. Just as 1:3 found its first conclusion in 2:24, in a similar manner, the question asked in 6:11 finds its first conclusion in 8:15.

Ecclesiastes 7 and 8 is a discussion of the vanity of wisdom and goodness. Though man earnestly seeks wisdom, he is not able to find it (7:23). Qoheleth recognized that there is some profit to wisdom (7:11, 12), but it has limitations and some things the wise man will simply never be able to figure out (7:24, 25). Man will never truly find lady wisdom (7:28).

In a similar vein, the wicked are held in high esteem in the city (8:10). Qoheleth recognized this enigma (vanity) and stated in 8:12 and 13 that regardless of the prosperity of the wicked, "it will be well with those who fear God" (8:12). In 8:14 he rehearsed the enigma again. Sometimes the wicked get what the righteous deserve and the righteous get what the wicked deserve. Qoheleth responded that this is not the way things are supposed to be! So how should one live? Life is an enigma! Enjoy the gifts God has given you (8:15).

Conclusion

Qoheleth repeatedly returned to the theme of enjoying life regardless of its vanities. 3:12 and 13 explains that we should enjoy life even though we are not always able to do the right thing at the right time. 5:18–20 instructs us to enjoy life in spite of the vanity of wealth. 8:15 teaches us to enjoy life

regardless of the enigma of wisdom and righteousness. In all three texts, Qoheleth noted that true enjoyment comes only through a relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ his Son.

Works Cited

1. Martin Luther wrote of this verse, “This is the principal conclusion, in fact the point, of the whole book, which he will often repeat.” (Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Last Words of David 2 Samuel 23:1–7*, trans. Martin Bertram, vol. 15 [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1972], 46.
2. The additional texts are 3:12, 13; 3:22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–9; and 11:8, 9.
3. Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth*, trans. O. C. Dean, *Hermeneia Commentary Series* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 118.
4. Choon Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, vol. 18C, *Anchor Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 224.

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