

Ecclesiastes: Preacher of Surprising Joy

Richard M. Wright
University Baptist Church
March 07, 2010
Session 2/4

Ecclesiastes 3

- The Byrds “Turn, Turn, Turn” (originally by Pete Seeger)
 - how does the song use Ecclesiastes 3?
- issue of time
 - purpose?
 - “beautiful in its time”
 - but can humans know what time it is?
 - ethics not just what to do (rules) but when

Ecclesiastes 1

- What kind of a world is this?
 - activity without purpose or rest
 - where is relationship in this world?

A few things to keep in mind

- Qohelet's critique
 - not everything is bad or evil
 - some things are
 - some things are just the way the world is
- Qohelet is on a journey (from chapter 1 to 12)
 - later statements > earlier statements
 - compare book of Psalms
 - general movement lament → praise
- We will look at Ecclesiastes according to theme

Story of the Wright family

- Richard “Dick” Wright
 - Digital Equipment Corporation
 - 24 years
 - salesman → district sales manager
 - number #1 in the nation
 - out of work for 3 years
 - never the same person
 - lost job, money, possessions → lost sense of self?
 - acute pulmonary embolism
 - 4 months after “starting again” in upstate New York

So what?

- We are finite
 - Ultimate futility of human effort
 - Ultimate futility of human knowledge
 - Do not know what will happen tomorrow
 - Do not know and cannot change what God does
- We are mortal
 - Everybody dies
- Remember these basic themes when reading Ecclesiastes

Juicy quote

The book of Ecclesiastes is at root a confession of disillusionment about life in general and the frustration of work in particular. [It] speaks to those who with great and ambitious plans are ripe for disillusionment, whether in the business world, politics, raising children, ministry, or academia. In every vocation there is the personal struggle over the perceived lack of effectiveness and progress that can bring one to the brink of burnout and despair. For clearly misguided reasons,... it is too easy to fall into the trap of pinning one's hopes on the human capacity to fulfill dreams and goals... (Brown, *Character*)

Critique of economics

- Eccl 2:18-23
- Eccl 4:4-8
- Eccl 5:10, 13-17
- Eccl 6:1-6

Critique of economics

- Eccl 2:18-23
 - pursue wealth but someone outside family gets it
- Eccl 4:4-8
 - pursue wealth but are never satisfied
- Eccl 5:10, 13-17
 - pursue wealth but suddenly lose it
- Eccl 6:1-6
 - pursue wealth but never have a chance to enjoy it

Juicy quotes

The arrogant ones keep climbing the ladder, but no matter how high they climb, there are always people higher up than they, who look down on them. The text goes on to speak of the insatiability of the greedy... These people keep consuming more and more, but they will never seem to have enough. They permit themselves no rest....

The author addresses those whose "eyes are not satisfied with wealth," who toil and toil even though they have neither descendants nor kinfolds with whom to share their wealth (4:7-8). The fear of poverty and the possibility of wealth prompted people to be excessively driven and to be ever discontented with what they had.... (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible)

Juicy quotes (continued)

Qohelet's audience does not seem secure with what they have. Rather, they are constantly toiling to acquire more and more, and they are worried about the possibility of losing what they have.... They are socially and economically in the middle... They are ordinary citizens facing the vagaries of a rapidly changing social world. They are... trying to scale the socioeconomic pyramid without sliding down into poverty... They are a people caught between the opportunities and risks of a volatile economy. (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*)

The economic environment favored the political elite and the most influential entrepreneurs. In consequence, the gap between the rich and the dependent classes widened.

Critique of society

- Eccl 4:1-2
- Eccl 5:8-9
- Eccl 8:10-14
- Eccl 4:7-8

Critique of society

- Eccl 4:1-2
 - no one comforts the poor or defends them from oppression
- Eccl 5:8-9
 - difficult to care for the poor
- Eccl 8:10-14
 - righteous/wicked treated as wicked/righteous
 - society cannot tell wisdom from folly or righteous from wicked
- Eccl 4:7-8
 - tragedy of living only for/with yourself

Juicy quotes (continued)

Qoheleth attributes the oppression of the poor to an interminable social hierarchy that diffuses communal responsibility for the poor. Either everyone's hands are tied or nobody cares in this bureaucracy of indifference.

Qoheleth unmasks the danger brought on by a form of works righteousness: the obsessive striving to outdo oneself and each other in righteousness. Such righteousness is rooted in thinking that one can know the work of God (8:16) (Brown, *Character in Crisis*)

Critique of wisdom and righteousness

- Eccl 2:12-17
- Eccl 3:16-21
- Eccl 7:15-22
- Eccl 8:16-17

Critique of wisdom and righteousness

- Eccl 2:12-17
 - wisdom and knowledge make no difference
- Eccl 3:16-21
 - no one knows the future or what God is doing
- Eccl 7:15-22
 - righteous and wicked all have same fate
 - death is the great equalizer
- Eccl 8:16-17
 - no one knows the future or what God is doing
 - God as inscrutable and mysterious

Knowledge and ignorance of God

- Cataphatic theology
 - positive affirmations
 - God is this or that
- Apophatic theology
 - negations
 - God is not this or that
 - God is ultimately indescribable and unknowable

Theology and Pseudo-Theology

- Pseudo-Theology as talking **about** God
 - Books and reading-talking-speaking rather than **prayer-worship-obedience**
- Rather than a revealing of God that comes out of experience of encounter **with** God
 - Clark Carlton, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Tennessee Tech, “Faith and Philosophy” podcasts
- 2nd type of heresy = forcing God to make sense to our limited (human) logic and reason
 - Either/or (which God is not) rather than **Both/and** (which God is)

Great cloud of unknowing

It is by *unknowing* (*agnosia*) that one may know [God] who is above every possible object of knowledge. Proceeding by negations one ascends from the inferior degrees of being to the highest, by progressively setting aside all that can be known, in order to draw near to the Unknown in the darkness of absolute ignorance. ... The knowledge of created things, and especially excess of knowledge, destroys the ignorance which is the only way one can attain to God in Himself (Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 25)

"I am exceedingly ignorant" (Ursula LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*)