QOHELETH’S WORLD AND LIFE VIEW AS SEEN IN HIS RECURRING PHRASES

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WITHIN the scope of Old Testament ethical problems falls the viewpoint of Qoheleth, or the Preacher, of Ecclesiastes. A superficial reading of the book reveals a man who definitely has a negative viewpoint of life in its many facets. If indeed the book is a unity, composed by one wise man, then the theme of pessimism or cynicism becomes a suggested option. But the ethical questions arising from such an understanding of the book become crucial.

Can a thoroughly pessimistic view of life have any place in the canonical books of Scripture? What exactly is the goal of Qoheleth’s ethics? Further, what does the God of Qoheleth really have to do with his life and standards of conduct? Again, does not the recurring theme of “there is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and make his soul enjoy good in his labor” (cf. 2:24; 3:12,13, etc.) denote a sort of Epicurean sentiment?

Qoheleth’s Ethical Perspective: Critical Views

Of course the modern critics of the Bible have seized upon the pessimism-cynicism suggestion with a vengeance. Morris Jastrow has suggested that the book teaches an ethical cynicism, where, in the face of no real goal to life, good humor is still to be maintained. (1) A popular view, held until recently, noted the phrase “Vanity of vanities” and attempted to draw certain parallelisms in thought and
perspective between Qoheleth’s notion of “vanity” and Heraclitus’s view that “all is flux”. However, most critical scholars today reject this argument as unconvincing. The recognized modern critical writer, G. Von Rad, has related the book to a supposed stage in Israel’s religious evolution at which “belief in Yahweh’s action in history grew weak” and Ecclesiastes “fell back on the cyclical way of thinking common to the East”.

D. Kidner comments that Von Rad’s argument rests on “precarious assumptions”. Along with the questionable premise that the thinking of the Ancient Near East was “cyclical”, the dating of the book still remains too much of an open question to make definite conclusions concerning the strength of belief “in Yahweh’s action in history”.

R. B. Y. Scott, in the Anchor Bible series, suggests the following concerning Qoheleth’s ethic: “His ethic has no relationship to divine commandments, for there are none. It arises rather from the necessity of caution and moderation before the inexplicable, on the acceptance of what is fated and cannot be changed, and finally on grasping firmly the only satisfaction open to man — the enjoyment of being alive. The author is a rationalist, an agnostic, a skeptic, a pessimist and a fatalist (the terms are not used pejoratively!).

Scott adds that Qoheleth teaches “philosophical nihilism” and has no real “religious” point of view. In response to such a characterization of Qoheleth’s ethics, we note that Scott, along with Von Rad, assumes the non-Christian ethical construct of a God, hidden behind an “impenetrable veil”, and One who can offer no clear revelation to Qoheleth. Qoheleth’s “God” is the Great Unknown of neo-orthodox theology. Qoheleth’s “God” is the Great Unknown of neo-orthodox theology. Qoheleth’s “God” is the Great Unknown of neo-orthodox theology. Qoheleth’s “God” is the Great Unknown of neo-orthodox theology. Qoheleth’s “God” is the Great Unknown of neo-orthodox theology.

Qoheleth’s wisdom lay in “recognizing the limitations of human knowledge and power” affirms Scott. Consequently, man cannot have an absolute good in the universe; he must remain satisfied with the relative good found in “relishing being alive”.

It does seem that Scott relies upon some kind of Kantian noumenal-
phenomenal distinction at this point. At the very least, his scheme is based upon a faith-knowledge dialectic where Qoheleth’s faith (if he possesses any) has nothing to do with his intellectual comprehension and explanation of the world about him.

Is indeed the goal of Qoheleth’s ethics some deterministic yet strangely “hidden” and silent Elohim-God, who barely resembles Israel’s covenant Yahweh? Is Qoheleth’s situation that of an ethical dilemma arising from hopeless pessimism? Must we finally agree with the non-Christian ethical view that since it is hopeless and foolish to look for perfection in this world and since, after all, God and man on Qoheleth’s model are subject to certain limitations it is best to seek to improve conditions to some extent, at least? Must we conclude that man should enjoy himself (2:24; etc.) and work with all his might (9:10), whatever God may say?

Qoheleth’s Ethical Perspective: Conservative Views
In response to critical views, evangelicals have attempted in various ways to justify Qoheleth’s seemingly negative attitude about life. For the most part, they have recognized the distinctively recurring phrases in Ecclesiastes.(9) However, it seems to me that they have not really dealt honestly with them.

Leupold analyzes the phrases “under the sun”, “vanity of vanities; all is vanity”, and suggests that Qoheleth deliberately concerns himself only with the things of this world. Revelation and the world to come are, for the sake of argument, temporarily ruled out. It is by this”as if” technique that Leupold explains Qoheleth’s seemingly negative outlook on the world.(10) Actually, however, Qoheleth really does “fear God and keep his commandments.”

Even Hengstenberg, though he has some valid penetrating remarks on the message of Ecclesiastes, points out that the theme, or themes, are difficult to delineate. In fact the whole book, including
these recurring themes, is “unintelligible except on the historical presupposition that the people of God was in a very miserable condition at the time of its composition.”(11) The Persians held dominion over the people of God. They were in a state of deepest misery and had consequently fallen prey to vanity. The radiant glory of Solomon’s day was no more (1:12-18), and this was a time of persecution.(12)

The date of composition was either contemporaneous with or after the time of Malachi. Thus, Qoheleth, in demonstrating the utter vanity of this life, would enable the people to appreciate fully the “fear of God” and “what a precious treasure man has in God”.(13)

Yet, even if one accepts a late, post-exilic dating and non-Solomonic authorship, both of which are unsettled in scholars’ minds, what about the seemingly “obvious” tone of resignation demonstrated over and over again in these phrases? Even on the historical construct of Hengstenberg and others they may still seem to portray Qoheleth as a man of “questionable” or “confused” ethics.

The frankness of the introductory note to the Scofield Bible concerning the recurring phrases and the entire book plays havoc with conservative “glossing over” or “dressing up of” the thought of Qoheleth — “This is the Book of man ‘under the sun’, reasoning about life; it is the best man can do, with the knowledge that there is a Holy God, and that He will bring everything into judgment. . . Inspiration sets down accurately what passes, but the conclusions and reasonings are, after all, man’s.”(14)

The spectre of pessimism once-more appears on the horizon of Qoheleth’s thought. Although these conservative writers have different emphases and methods of interpretation, they will all agree on one crucial ethical area, namely the situational perspective of Qoheleth.

Qoheleth is a man who, though he does fear God and stresses
the keeping of His commandments (12:13), looks at the world about him from the standpoint of reason that has very little relationship with his “blind faith” in the Creator. A distinct dichotomy between faith and reason can be clearly seen in Leupold, Delitzsch, and Scofield when they deal with the recurring phrases. Even Hengstenberg does not totally escape this faith-reason dialectic. He mentions that Qoheleth’s pervasive use of the name Elohim shows that “the problem before the writer is considered from the point of view of Natural Theology with the aid of experience, and of reason as purified by the Spirit of God.”(15)

Finally, Sierd Woudstra, who criticizes Leupold for his nature-grace dichotomy in interpreting Qoheleth’s thought, falls into speaking of two concurrent lines of thought prevalent in Qoheleth: “Koheleth is on the one hand dealing with life as he observed it, while on the other hand he knew and was convinced by faith that things were different.”(16) However, Woudstra here raises an important issue in the interpretation of the ethical perspective of Qoheleth. If there does exist a distinction here, that distinction is not between faith and reason but between faith and sight, i.e. between “faith” (that comes from special revelation) and that revelation presently available to any natural man as he perceives the creation about him.

Of course, such a distinction can be seen in the New Testament record (cf. Rom. 1:18-32; Acts 14: 15-17; Acts 17:22-31). But, in what sense and to what degree is such a “distinction” relevant to Qoheleth?

To begin with, Qoheleth was not merely a theologian working from the construct of “natural theology” who then attempted to understand God’s creation without the interpretative key of special revelation. As we shall demonstrate later, he looked upon life and the world from the perspective of an Old Testament believer who had understood the reality of the curse of God placed upon life “under
the sun” in Gen. 3. Hence, Qoheleth’s wisdom and knowledge of this world was not merely that of a propositional and sense-experience sort. He approached the world and the life-situation by presupposing a Creator God who had indeed revealed Himself in creation, in the fall and in the subsequent history of redemption. He stood in a culture which knew Yahweh and the world about them in terms of direct revelation given through the Law and the Prophets.

Consequently, his knowledge of anything must presuppose his knowledge of God, which sprang from a proper attitude of the fear of God. Thus, Qoheleth’s “faith” and “sight” were not something wholly distinct from and independent of each other (cf. below, Phrase 4).

But also, they do not oppose one another in the book of Ecclesiastes. The historical-redemptive antecedents of Qoheleth’s sight-perspective find their point of reference in the fall and curse of Gen. 3. Intimations to such a reference-point are found in an exposition of some of his recurring phrases and their contexts (cf. below, Phrase 1, Phrase 4).

Moreover, the twin-idea of all men being “of dust” (3:20; 12:7) and “turning or returning to dust again” (3:20)”to the earth as it was” (12:7) when they die, no doubt has its primary reference in Gen. 3:19: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.” (17)

Further, the consequences of Qoheleth’s sight-perspective merely drive him to acknowledge that wisdom resides in fearing God and keeping His commandments (12:13). Consequently, any claim that Qoheleth’s ethic falls into the imperfect ethical thought of the Old Testament and that we must therefore expect some sort of faith-reason, or rather faith-sight, dichotomy cannot be maintained.

Yet, in another sense, since Qoheleth does refer back to the fall and the resultant curse, he like Paul in Acts 14 (cf. Acts 17 and also
Rom. 1) makes a case that is largely restricted to that revelation made available by the Creator God to all natural men who live in the light of the fall. Qoheleth gives the natural man an astoundingly lucid description of what he can behold in this world and his life which should drive him to seek God and His self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

To demonstrate this we notice two points. First of all, to the Lycaonian Gentiles Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14: 15ff. restrict their case to that revelation available to these people in the Creator God (vs. 15) providentially giving them “rains and fruitful seasons filling your hearts with food and gladness.” (vs. 17) F. F. Bruce suggests that the imagery here is drawn from several Old Testament texts, one of which Ecc. 9: 7 (cf. below, Phrase 5).(18) This “gladness” was a gift God to these Gentiles by which they should have discerned His rule over them.(19) It was therefore foolish and vain them to attempt to perform that worship before Paul and Barnabas which, by the light of even natural revelation alone, belonged only to the Creator.

Then, also, the theme of foolishness for unregenerate men not recognizing the “power and divinity” of the God of the creation in which they live and move is brought out clearly in Rom. 1: 18ff.(20) These unrighteous acts of the Gentiles in the light of God’s natural revelation proceeded not from a mere deficiency in mental capacity but from moral obtuseness, or foolishness (vs. 22).(21)

Again, F. F. Bruce points out that the term used by Paul for “fool” probably refers back to the “fool” of the Old Testament Wisdom Literature.(22) Here we have a tie-in with Qoheleth’s exposition in Ecclesiastes. As natural men observe the creation about them there are only two possible options for a philosophy of life. One is to claim the “wisdom” of this world and thus become fools in the sight of God. The other is to recognize the stark reality of the picture Qoheleth paints for him and to heed the command, “Fear God and keep His commandments” (cf. below, Phrase 6). True wisdom resides in this
alone.

Before we consider the recurring phrases, it is necessary to make some preliminary remarks on the method of interpretation of Qoheleth's ethic in these phrases. To begin with, we should attempt to understand the book in the apparent way Qoheleth has composed it. He has done so by using certain phrases which occur over and over again throughout the twelve chapters. I think that J. Stafford Wright has a valid hermeneutical principle in mind when he suggests that examination of these recurring phrases reveals, at the very least, Qoheleth's thought in the immediate context of the book.(23)

Secondly, Qoheleth’s directive in 12:13 and the remark in vs. 14 skilfully summarizes and concludes his whole ethical stance. Qoheleth’s ethical integrity is grounded in the practice of the fear of God along with the keeping of His commandments, and however we analyze the rest of the book we must not contravene Qoheleth’s own ethical conclusion.

Third, we must remember that Ecclesiastes appears in the broader context of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. That literature, though similar in some formal characteristics with other Ancient Near East Wisdom Literature, cannot be identified with it in its ethical perspective. Qoheleth’s wisdom has its foundation clearly laid in the fear of the Lord.

Finally, we must understand Qoheleth’s ethical perspective in the general context of the rest of the Old Testament and in the light of the One who embodied this wisdom in the New Testament, even Jesus Christ. We affirm that Qoheleth does not disagree with other Old Testament thought. Rather, he writes in the context of the doctrines of the fall and man’s sin. He does not dispute their revelatory character and relevance to his situation; he assumes their validity for his life and world view. Also, he looks forward in hope to the New Testament in his doctrine of the fear of the Lord and the coming judgment of the
secret thoughts of man.

Qoheleth’s Ethical Perspective in Light of the Recurring Phrases

1. Phrase 1: “All is vanity” or “This is vanity” (1:2, 14; 2:1,11, 17, 26, 15, 19,21,23; 3:19; 4:4, 8, 7, 16; 5:7(6), 10(9); 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 9:9; 11:8, 10; 12:8 repetition of 1:2)

This phrase is the most dominant and pervasive of all the recurring phrases in Ecclesiastes. Hengstenberg disagrees with those who would attempt to make this phrase the one theme of the book since it does not sufficiently explicate some of the other material in the book. Yet its dominance in Qoheleth’s thought renders it a key to the interpretation of life “under the sun”.

Woudstra states the main exegetical question concerning this class of phrases well: Is Koheleth only saying that man’s accomplishments under the sun are transitory in character, are devoid of any permanence, or is he saying that human existence and everything that goes with it is futile and meaningless?(24)

The latter, Leupold holds, gives the term hebel [חֶבֶל] a pessimistic connotation not warranted by the facts.(25) He claims that the term refers to “that which is fleeting and transitory and also suggests the partial futility of human effort.”(26) Woudstra, on the other hand, opts for the latter description of hebel and denies that this implies a pessimism that the critics would like to see here.

A thorough study of the word in the contexts mentioned above reveals that the term takes on different connotations in different contexts. Theophile Meek says that “in this short book, hebel would seem to be used in at least five different senses: ‘futile’ (most frequent, e.g., 1:2), ‘empty’ (e.g., 6:12), ‘sorry’ (e.g., 6:4), ‘senseless’ (e.g., 8:14), and ‘transient’ (e.g., 11:10).”(27) He therefore proposes that
the term takes on different meanings in different contexts. With respect to other Old Testament literature, *hebel* can refer to that which is “unsubstantial, evanescent” as far as a basis for religious trust is concerned (cl. Jer. 1:15; 51:18; 16:19). In Ps. 39:4ff, man is in a “turmoil over vanity” (vs. 6), over the labor to attain breaths of wind. His “precious things” cannot endure because they partake of the nature of “vanity”.

The power of Meek’s suggestion in the immediate context of Ecclesiastes lies in the fact that it seems to give the term the flexibility of connotation that Qoheleth evidently employs in these recurring phrases. Different “aspects” of the idea of vanity are employed by Qoheleth to vividly illustrate the reality of the curse of God placed upon the work of man after the Fall (cl. Gen. 3: 17-19). Therefore, an attempt to find a “static” meaning to *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, as Woudstra and others do, fails to take note of the richness of the concept as used by Qoheleth.

Those aspects which are available to every man, and from which none can entirely escape, are a life and labor that are wearisome (cf. Job. 7:3), filled often with sorrow and pain (cf. Job. 3: 10; Ps. 25: 18; 73:16) and will only end up in physical at the very least. Also, Qoheleth tells us that this created partakes of the character of “vanity” (cf. 7: 15; 9:9). Yet, man’s effort in this context is given to him as a gift of God (3:13,14; 6:2).

Therefore, natural man cannot claim that his efforts are “meaningless” or that the situation in which he finds himself forces him to sin, since God made labor a good gift. It is the fear of God alone and the keeping of His commandments which can give men the ability to enjoy this gift of labor. Yet, Qoheleth’s faith does not change the character of a created order which now partakes of the character of vanity (cf. Rom. 8 and below). Consequently, excruciating moral problems do exist for Qoheleth because the ground after the curse
brought on by the becomes an occasion for temptation.

2. **Phrase 2**: “under the sun” (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 5, 12; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5)

   This second phrase forms the immediate context of a world which has the constitution and course of “vanity”. It has reference to the place where the toil of man occurs and is tantamount to הַארץ (cf. 8:14, 16; 11:2). Notice that this phrase is unique to Qoheleth.

3. **Phrase 3**: “striving after wind” (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9)

   With the exception of 4:6 this expression is always joined to the phrase containing the word “vanity”. A man may determine or make up his mind to accomplish something eternally significant in a creation subjected to vanity, yet no matter how hard he tries Qoheleth tells him it will be a fruitless endeavor (cf. 1:14 and use of רָשָׁע). A man in his toil “under the sun” grasps after the wind and attains precious little for all his labor.

4. **Phrase 4**: (a) “I perceived” (1:17; 2:14; 3:22) (b) “I said in my heart” (2:1, 15; 3:17, 18; 9:1) (c) “I gave my heart to consider” & variations (1:13, 17; 2:3; 7:25; 8:9, 16; 9:1)

   Most interpreters have more or less considered this class of phrases as indicative of a thoroughgoing research activity, primarily involving mental conception of various empirical facts. Leupold maintains that these phrases merely indicate an experiment of Qoheleth in rational thinking, thinking that, for the time-being, is unaided by enlightened reason and revelation from God. (30)

   As noted above, Hengstenberg would disagree with Leupold’s
conjecture and claim that this class of phrases demonstrates Qoheleth’s enlightened reason operating in the sphere of natural theology. But again, revelation has very little to do with Qoheleth’s perception of this world of vanity.

However, we must maintain, contrary to the majority of critical and conservative commentators, that Qoheleth’s perception as indicated in this class of phrases refers to a knowledge which is a “reflex-action” of his fear of God and which penetrates to the essence of the meaning of what this world of vanity is all about. Surely, Qoheleth does perceive the vanity “under the sun” which does not exclude the intellectual element of knowledge of these things. Yet that perception also includes a deep, spiritual insight into the effects of the curse of God upon life and labor “under the sun”.

Two very common Hebrew words (ראה and ידע) are used to denote the sight-action involved here. Commenting on 1:17, Delitzsch notes that “… daath is knowledge penetrating into into the depth of the essence of things, by which wisdom is acquired and in which wisdom establishes itself.”(31) However, he distinguishes between this “type” of knowing and the “intellectual” experience recorded in verse 16 -”my heart hath seen (MN1) wisdom and knowledge in fullness.” “The seeing here ascribed to the heart is meant of intellectual observation and apprehension….”(32) As to [יִדְעָו], Qoheleth uses it to refer to a spiritual perception (cf., for example, 3: 12, 14; 8:5; 9:12;10: 14; 11:2,5).

In 7:25f. notice that spiritual conception arising from revelation, not from experimental data, intellectually found and studied, accounts for the acknowledgment of the truth in vs. 29: “God made man upright.” Indeed, a man’s own reasoning ability functions in the context of vanity too (cf. 8: 16, 17)!

But, furthermore, the distinction which Delitzsch (and others)
makes between the ראה-seeing and the ידע-seeing cannot be sustained either on general Christian-theistic anthropological grounds or on specific exegetical grounds in Ecclesiastes.

As to the latter consideration, we recognize the close tie between ראה and ידע in 6:3-6. In verses 3 and 4 Qoheleth states that even an “untimely birth” comes and goes in the context of vanity just as a man who lives many years (vs. 3) lives in the context of vanity. On that consideration there is no difference.

However, what is better about this “untimely birth” than the long-lived man without a burial and without “his soul being filled with good” is that at least this child “hath not seen the sun nor known it” (שמש אל־ראה ולא־ידע). A purely “intellectual perception” of life under the sun and a deeper, spiritual perception are brought so close together grammatically that they are interdependent.

Secondly, in this class of phrases we have Qoheleth using the term לב (kardia in LXX), “I said in my heart, etc.” While Leupold relates all of these sayings to the realm of empirical experiences, Qoheleth does not do so. Rather, Qoheleth employs the bond that exists between religion and ethics which is found the Wisdom Literature’s concept of “heart”. Yes, it is true that the will, aims, principles, thoughts, and intellect of man are found in the heart (cf. Provo 18:15; Job 8:10; Jer. 23:20; 11:20). Yet, also, the “heart” describes the whole person (Ps. 22:26; Prov. 23:15f, etc.) and in it dwells the “fear of God” (cf. Jer. 32:40).

How can Qoheleth, out of an ethic dominated by the fear of God, look on the world solely from an intellectual, empirical sense that is somehow to be distinctly differentiated from “heart” consideration of the world? Surely, Qoheleth perceives this world of vanity from the “unity and totality of the inner life represented and expressed in the variety of intellectual and spiritual gifts.”(33)
5. Phrase 5: “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and make his soul enjoy good in his labor” (2:24; 3:12, 13; 3:22; 8:15; 5:18, 19; 9:7, 9)

It has been claimed by the critics that Qoheleth here expressed his “questionable ethic” by approving of some form of Epicureanism. However, the six occurrences of this phrase support nothing of the sort. In His gracious wisdom God has given Qoheleth the insight to a proper understanding of how man is to labor in light of the curse.

True, it is hard work, and the ground does not easily give its riches to man. Yet man’s attitude in all his labor should be to rejoice in it (8:15) and work with all his might. This is what belongs to man in the context of vanity (3:22).(34) In the midst of life’s confusion mankind receives a call from God to rejoice. In this redemptive-historical “time of ignorance” when God patiently “suffered all the nations to walk in their own ways” (cf. Acts 14, 17) Qoheleth counsels all men as to their labor before their Creator.

Therefore the readers are not led into some Epicurean work-ethic or “to the desperate attempt. ..to snatch what they can while there is still time.” (35) This toil cannot endure for eternity since it takes place “under the sun”. Hence, the ozm”se reader will see that that which abides is the eternal work of God (3:11, 14, 15) and that all men must place their fear in Him alone (3:14 ; cf. 2:22-26) and not in their vanishing works done under the sun. In this very practical situation there is truly “nothing better” for a man to do than to rejoice in what God has providentially given him (cf. I Sam. 27:1).


If we ask ourselves why it is that Qoheleth possessed an unusually
keen perception (cf. Phrase 4) of the actual condition of man and his world (cf. Phrases 1-3) and yet understood his role in that context of vanity (Phrase 5), we must reply that Qoheleth practiced the fear of God. In that fear he found wisdom and knowledge and hence could understand the fall and its effects “under the sun” (Prov. 1:29; 2:5; 1:7; 9:10).

With respect to ethics, Qoheleth found the fear of the Lord the foundation of his faith and practice in a world in which human wisdom is limited. His keenness of insight and exceeding fruitfulness of thought was ensured by his fear of God. That fear also ensured the integration of the theoretical and the practical in Qoheleth’s perception of this world subjected to vanity.

Indeed, we have noted this in the examination of the fourth class of recurring phrases. Therefore Qoheleth’s God was not some “hidden” Great Unknown who did not have very much to do with his ethical point of view. Rather, Qoheleth found that all of our knowing and applying of personal ethics must be related to humble faith in the Creator God.

Since he knew that worship takes place in the presence of the living God Qoheleth could stress the fear of Him against the foolish multitude of form-ritualism that was then prevalent within the Temple (5: 1-7). Further, since he knew that all our labor partook of the character of “vanity” he had to affirm that, instead of attempting either to frustrate God’s purposes or to add to them, we should rather submit ourselves to them, in reverence to our God (3:13ff.).

Finally, Qoheleth joined the “keeping of God’s commandments” to the general imperative “Fear God” (12: 13) to indicate to men that their ethical standard must be the revealed Word of God. Of course, Qoheleth knew that men will attempt to hide their works from the searching eye of God, yet he nails his hearers to this truth of “fearing God” by pointing to the truth of the coming judgment of God.
Certainly, many evil things are done in this context of vanity which are hid to men’s eyes, yet God will reveal them all at a future judgment day to take place in the coming Messianic Age (cf. Mal. 3:5).

How do we relate the ethical situation and conclusions of Qoheleth to that of the believer today? New Testament evidence in Rom. 8:18-22 tells us plainly that a state of “vanity” now exists and that it had a beginning and will have an end. Before its beginning recorded in the curse of Gen. 3 stands a God and a ḥesed without vanity, and at its end stands the hope of a “new heavens and a new earth” no longer under that curse. The coming of the Messiah and the subsequent Age of the Spirit have brought freedom from that curse and from the effects of vanity only in principle; the full realization of that liberation awaits the Second Advent. Indeed, the Messiah came into this world of vanity and took upon Himself the labor (‘amal) of a cursed world. We read in Isaiah 53:11 that the Suffering Servant “shall see the fruits of the travail (‘amal) of his soul and be satisfied.”

Therefore, in contradiction to Qoheleth who stood in an age of the history of redemption among wise and foolish men, both of whom could never overcome the inevitable fact of death, Christ came and conquered death for the believer. The New Testament believer lives in the present light of Christ who has come and who has delivered us from the bondage of sin and death.

However, until he comes again, we live in the stark reality of the suffering which characterizes a world under the curse (Rom. 8:18). How then shall we view life and labor today? We may regard Qoheleth’s thoughts on life and labor as developed from his recurring phrases as a normative pattern of experience to be applied by way of analogy to our situation today. Qoheleth’s analysis functions as a vivid reminder for the natural man of the reality of the curse.
For the believer Qoheleth’s ethic remains meaningful since it finds the present situation rooted in the past declaration of the curse of God upon the creation “under the sun” and moving toward the future renewal of the cosmic order in the hopeful certainty of God’s just Judgment of the innermost thoughts of men at the Second Advent (12:14).(38)

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6. This is substantially true of the view expressed in G. A. Buttrick, et al. (eds.), The Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. V (New York: Abingdon, -1956), p. 22: “He (Qoheleth) does not doubt the existence and sovereignty of God, but his God is absentee, lost in the distance, not only apparently careless of mankind but at variance with it.”
7. Scott, p. 206.
8. Ibid., p. 196.
9. There are six of these recurring phrases in the book of Ecclesiastes; the phrases and Scriptural references are listed in this section.
10. This is especially apparent in H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Ecclesiastes (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1952), pp. 92-93.
12. Ibid., pp. 2-16.
13. Ibid., p. 16.
17. Comparing the Hebrew of Gen. 3:19 with Ecc. 3:20 and 12:7 we notice some interesting syntactic parallels:

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\begin{align*}
שב אל־עפר & \quad (\text{Ecc. 3:20}) \\
אל־עפר תשוב & \quad (\text{Gen. 3:19}) \\
ר琛 יד הר אל־הארץ & \quad (\text{Ecc. 12:7}) \\
שובך אל־האדמה & \quad (\text{Gen. 3:19})
\end{align*}
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Hengstenberg maintains that the foundation of Ecc. 3:20 is found in Gen. 3:19 (op. cit., p. 118) while allusion is made to Gen. 3:19 in Ecc. 12:7 (cf. p. 253.).

18. Cf. F. F. Bruce, Commentary on the Book of Acts (Grand Rapids: 1954). The term for gladness (εὐφροσύνη) is used in the of Ecc. 9:7 and translates הַזֶּר. Other possible references to Old Testament imagery for vs. 17 are Ps. 4:7 and Is. 25:6. At the very least, the Apostles may be alluding to the passage in Ecc. 9:7.

19. “This εὐφροσύνη can also be gratefully understood as the gift of God by which even the heathen may discern his providential rule, Acts 14:17.” (R. Bultmann, article on εὐφροσύνη / εὐφροσύνη, Vol. II, TWNT, ed. G. Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 774.

20. M. D. Hooker maintains that Paul in Rom. 1:18-32 had the figure of Adam in mind: “In these verses he deliberately described man’s predicament in terms of the biblical narrative of Adam’s fall. Not only does the language of this section echo that of Gen. 1:20-6 but the sequence of events is reminiscent of the story of Adam in Gen. 1-3.” (M. D. Hooker, “A Further Note on Romans 1,” NT Studies 13 (Jan., 1967), p. 181; cf. also his “Adam in Romans 1,” NT Studies 6 (1959-1960), pp 297-306). C. K. Barrett develops this thesis in From First Adam to Last (London, 1962, pp. 17-19) and claims that the moral wickedness described in Rom. 1 is the direct result of the Fall. Finally, Robert Haldane in his Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans (Banner, 1960) notes that the wrath of God “was revealed when the sentence of death was first pronounced, the earth cursed and man driven out of the earthly paradise…” (P. 55). We might therefore be able to draw a redemptive-historical link between the Fall/Curse, Qoheleth and Paul in Rom. 1 and hence in Acts 14 and 17.

21. Cf. F. F. Bruce, Epistle to the Romans, Tyndale Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963). Calvin says that impiety here should be joined to unrighteousness (Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, p. 68).

22. Cf. F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Romans. He also notes that parallels exist between later Israelite Wisdom Literature (c£.. Wisdom 12-14). Hooker (op. cit.) make a similar point in his exposition of this section.

23. Wright, op. cit., p. 22 has a rather uncritical way of suggesting this hermeneutical principle. Nevertheless, I feel he has a valid principle in mind.

24. Woudstra, p. 38.

25. Leupold, p. 41.

26. Ibid.


29. Even as early as Gen. 4:2 in the history of redemption Eve was overcome by the discovery of the vanity of this earthly life. This is expressed in the naming of "Abel": אבֵאל.

30. Leupold, p. 55.


32. Delitzsch reasons thus: “...for all perception, whether it be mediated by the organs of sense or not (as prophetic observing and contemplating), comprehends all, from mental discernment down to suffering, which veils itself in unconsciousness, and the Scripture designates it as seeing” (Ibid.) Much of this comment seems to proceed from his particular view of psychology, which tends to break up the psycho-physical unity of man into artificial compartments.


34. הלק man's due or his portion.


36. Notice Paul’s use of the term mataio<thj for “vanity”, which is same term used in the LXX rendering of Ecclesiastes for this word.

37. The principle of analogy is a hermeneutical principle used in the interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the New. It refers to the embodiment of a certain principle of redemptive truth which can constantly recur in the history of redemption. Although it may probably more fully developed in the New Testament, there is no inherent demand in analogy for fulfillment in an anti-type.

38. Since the judgment spoken of in 12: 14 cannot take place now before men since the hidden things are not able to be seen by men, Qoheleth refers to a future judgment. Further, the primary objective reference of משפט (krisei) is to the Day of Judgment recorded in the New Testament (cf. Rom. 2:16; I Cor. 4:5; I Tim. 5:24, 25).

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OVERVIEW

1. The Flow of the Book*
   • Introducing the Journey (1:1–11)
   • Pursuing and Exploring Life (1:12 – 6:9)
   • Reflecting and Summarizing (6:10 – 11:6)
   • Being Young and Growing Old (11:7 – 12:8)
   • Final Conclusions (12:9–14)

2. Author = “The words of the Teacher/“Qoheleth” = “one who gathers people to learn.” Different suggestions here are King Solomon, another descendent of David, a later Israelite teacher using a Solomon-like persona.

2. Repeated phrases**
   • “under the sun” = 29 times. Realm of grievous labor, endless cycles, injustice and wickedness, short lifespan. Material world of earthly pleasures, chance and human experience apart from God. Secular humanism, materialism, naturalism, agnosticism and even atheism.
   • “All is vanity” = 30 times. (Heb. Is hebel) Transitoriness or labor that is futile or meaningless. Used in five different senses for futile, empty, sorry, senseless and transient. OT meaning is unsubstantial, evanescent.
   • “striving after wind” = 7 times. A man in toil “under the sun” grasps after the wind and attains precious little for all his labor.
   • “I perceived;” “said in my heart;” “gave my heart to consider” = 15 times. A thoroughgoing research activity, primarily involving mental conception of various empirical facts. Rational thinking unaided by enlightened reasoning from God. Conservative scholars say this is looking realistically on the world from a heart lived under the fear of God.
   • “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and make his soul enjoy good in his labor” = 9 times. How to labor for God in light of the curse in Genesis 3. Critics would say this spells some form of Epicurianism.
   • “fear God” phrases = 6 times. The writer practiced the fear of God and found the wisdom and knowledge he needed living in a world of vanity.

3. Exposing the Lies About Life (Eccl. 1:1–18)
   • I want you to think of life WITHOUT God in it. Try very hard to describe that life as it relates to work, family, personal ups and downs, wins and losses.
   • Of the following four life axioms that you may have heard, which have you heard the most in your life journey with others:
• “Laugh and the world laughs with you. Cry and you cry alone.”
• “Every day and in every way our world is getting better and better.”
• “There’s a light at the end of every tunnel.”
• “Things never are as bad as they seem. So dream, dream, dream.”

• What do you think of these two applications from Swindoll?
  (1) If there is nothing but nothing “under the sun” our only hope must lie beyond it.

  (2) If a man who had everything investigated everything visible, then the one thing needed must be invisible.

**Carl Shank, “Qoheleth’s World and Life View As Seen in His Recurring Phrases,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, 1974. Available at https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/OTeSources/21-Ecclesiastes/Text/Articles/Shank-QohLife-View-WTJ.htm
Work Becomes Pointless

“So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

Ecclesiastes 2:17

Under the Sun

We have seen that work in a fallen world can be fruitless; it can also be pointless. This is another aspect of the alienation human beings sense in their work. That is, while many workers are frustrated by unconsummated skills and unfulfilled aspirations, many others experience no satisfaction or fulfillment in their work even when they have realized their aspirations and become successful.

One of the most poignant expressions of the way human work can feel so profoundly meaningless comes from a very ancient document, the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. The narrator in the book of Ecclesiastes is called, in Hebrew, Qoheleth, which can be translated as “the Teacher” or perhaps even “the Philosopher.”

In order to understand what Ecclesiastes has to say about work, however, we need to take a moment to understand the literary genre of the book and how the author gets his points across. Anyone who reads through Ecclesiastes will be struck by many things that appear to contradict the rest of the Bible. While the Bible everywhere challenges people to live thoroughly wise and righteous lives, Ecclesiastes seems to warn about being “too righteous” or too wicked and commends a middle road—not too moral or too immoral, not too wise or too foolish (Ecclesiastes 7:15–17). How do we explain statements like this?

Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman points out that there was a literary form at that time called “fictional autobiography.”
In this form, the writer could introduce a fictional character, give a description of his or her life’s course, and then conclude with general insights and teachings drawn from the case study of the recounted life.

And indeed in Ecclesiastes it is possible to discern two narrators or voices. First the writer of the prologue introduces the fictional character Qoheleth, who in turn speaks in the first person about all the ways he sought to find fulfillment and meaning in life under the sun.

The term “under the sun” is crucial to understanding the perspective of the Philosopher. In general, it refers to life in this world considered in and of itself, apart from any greater or eternal reality. The quest of the Philosopher is to have a meaningful life based solely on what can be found within the confines of this material world—achievement, pleasure, and learning. Finally, the original writer speaks in his own voice again and does an evaluation in the epilogue (12:8–14). Thus the writer can dramatize his main themes by depicting the wisest, richest, most gifted man possible, who nonetheless could not find fulfillment in this life.

Some books of the Bible are like listening to a pastor giving counsel on how to live (the book of James in the New Testament, for example, or Proverbs in the Old Testament). But reading Ecclesiastes is like sitting in a philosophy class with a professor who provokes you with thorny Socratic questions and strange case studies, who pulls you into a dialogue to lead you to discover truth for yourself.

The Philosopher pushes you to look at the foundations of your life and to ask the basic questions that we might otherwise avoid: “Is there any meaning to your life? What are you really doing it all for? Why is there so much wrong with the world? How will you cope with it?” The author of Ecclesiastes is using the character of the Philosopher to push readers toward an understanding of the transcendent uniqueness and necessity of God. Nothing within this world is sufficient basis for a
meaningful life here. If we base our lives on work and achievement, on love and pleasure, or on knowledge and learning, our existence becomes anxious and fragile—because circumstances in life are always threatening the very foundation of our lives, and death inevitably strips us of everything we hold dear.

_Ecclesiastes is an argument that existential dependence on a gracious Creator God—not only abstract belief—is a precondition for an unshakeable, purposeful life._ Katherine Alsdorf, like many who make their way to our church well into their careers, can relate to all three of these pursuits: seeking the meaning of life through learning in college, pursuing pleasure and adventure after that, followed by an almost desperate thrust into work and career in her thirties in a full-tilt effort to make life fulfilling.

She began to accumulate accomplishments and even some financial prosperity, but grew increasingly stressed and even bitter. She describes her resentment, at the time, of others who were enjoying the fruits of a good life that they hadn’t fully earned! Her accomplishments were never enough, and the abundant benefits were never satisfying.

As she would put it, “I couldn’t handle the idea that it was all meaningless, so I just put my head down and worked harder.” Eventually, she started to consider the gospel of Christ because the philosophies of this world were taking her nowhere. The emptiness of life was pushing her toward her own understanding of that transcendent uniqueness of God.

**The Meaninglessness of Work**
The Philosopher makes his case in stages. The book begins with what has been called three “life projects,” each an effort to discover a meaningful life under the sun. The first is a quest to make sense of
life through learning and wisdom (Ecclesiastes 1:12–18; 2:12–16). The second is an effort to make life fulfilling through the pursuit of pleasure (2:1–11). The third project that the Philosopher undertakes to chase away his sense of pointlessness is the pursuit of achievement through hard work (Ecclesiastes 2:17–26).

Having tried to live for learning and for pleasure, he now tries to live for the accomplishment of concrete goals and the accrual of wealth and influence. But in the end he concludes that work cannot, all by itself, deliver a meaningful life. “So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:17). Why does he draw this conclusion?

When we work, we want to make an impact. That can mean getting personal recognition for our work, or making a difference in our field, or doing something to make the world a better place. Nothing is more satisfying than a sense that through our work we have accomplished some lasting achievement. But the Philosopher startles us by arguing that even if you are one of the few people who breaks through and accomplishes all you hope for, it’s all for nothing, for in the end there are no lasting achievements. “I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:18–20).

Whether quickly or slowly, all the results of our toil will be wiped away by history. The person who takes the business after you, or who picks up the cause or organization after you, may undo all you have done. Of course, some history makers have brought inventions or innovations that stay with the human race for a long time, but those
persons are very rare, and of course eventually even the most famous “will not be long remembered” (Ecclesiastes 2:16) since everything and every accomplishment under the sun will be ground to dust in the end—even civilization itself.

All work, even the most historic, will eventually be forgotten and its impact totally neutralized (1:3–11). In short even if your work is not fruitless, it is ultimately pointless if life “under the sun” is all there is.

The Alienation of Work

Work under the sun is meaningless because it does not last; and so it takes away our hope in the future. It also alienates us from God and from one another, so it takes away our joy in the present. We may again be sympathetic to Antonio Salieri within the narrative of the play Amadeus.

Here is a man who aspires to create extraordinary music but instead is given modest talents. Being near Mozart shows him how ordinary his music is. He asks God to fill him with creative brilliance, but to no avail. Salieri becomes furious with God. So he says to God, “From now on we are enemies, You and I . . . Because You will not enter me, with all my need for you; because You scorn my attempts. . . . You are unjust, unfair, unkind. . . .”

Salieri turns bitter against God and does what he can to destroy Mozart, God’s instrument. Was God being unfair and unkind? If he was, he wasn’t being so only to Salieri. Arguably, only a handful of musicians in all of history have been given gifts like Mozart had.

No, Salieri’s response was unusually dark and desperate because he had built his entire life on his dream of fame through music. He had begun by trying to put God in his debt: Whilst my father prayed earnestly to God to protect commerce, I would offer up secretly the proudest prayer a boy could think of. Lord, make me a great
composer! Let me celebrate your glory through music—and be celebrated myself! Make me famous through the world, dear God! Make me immortal! After I die let people speak my name forever with love for what I wrote!

The word “immortal” is the key to what was going on in Salieri’s heart. His appropriate ambition had become his misplaced salvation; so his considerable success was not enough. He experienced not ordinary disappointment, but alienation and heartbreak, because he was not as good as Mozart.

“What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 2:22–23). Grief and pain so great that he cannot rest: This is the experience of the person whose soul is resting wholly on the circumstances of their work.

In this poignant picture, the author is consciously contrasting us with the God whose labor led to real rest (Genesis 2:2), and unconsciously with the Savior who could even sleep through a storm (Mark 4:38).

Another reason that work feels so alienating is the injustice and depersonalization ever-present in all social systems, and which so often infect the nature of work we do. For example, in Ecclesiastes 5, verse 8, Qoheleth says, “If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still.”

Old Testament commentator Michael A. Eaton writes of this text that Qoheleth “considers the frustrations of oppressive bureaucracy with its endless delays and excuses . . . and justice is lost between the tiers of the hierarchy.” When Qoheleth wrote, only government was a large enough institution to have a bureaucracy, but the last two hundred years have seen the rise of industrialization and the modern
Karl Marx was the first person to speak of “alienated labor” in the heyday of early-nineteenth-century European industry, where “thousands of workers crowded into industrial centers . . . working fourteen hours a day at physically debilitating and mentally stultifying factory jobs . . . [a]t its best, work was a grim form of self-denial for the sake of mere physical survival.”

Of course for centuries most people endured backbreaking work just to survive, yet at least in small farms or shops it was possible to see the product of one’s work. But in a factory, a worker might be tasked to put five nuts onto wheel lugs every thirty seconds, hour after hour, day after day.

In his book Working, Studs Terkel interviewed many industrial workers, including Mike, who put steel parts onto a rack, lowered them into a vat of paint that bonded to their surfaces, and then raised and unloaded the rack. That was all he did. “‘Put it on, take it off, put it on, take it off,’ he reports. ‘In between I don’t even try to think. . . .’ His job is typical of manufacturing work or even office work which has been subdivided and simplified for the sake of efficiency and higher productivity.”

The great shift from an industrial economy to a knowledge and service economy has improved the immediate working conditions of many but has locked countless others into low-paying service sector jobs that experience the same alienating disconnection from the fruits or products of their work.

And even in many areas such as finance, where workers make far more than “sweatshop” wages, the size and complexity of global corporations now makes it difficult for even high-ranking executives to understand what their labor is producing. A banker in a small town making mortgage and small business loans can easily see the purpose and fruit of her labor. A bank worker bundling thousands of subprime
loans and buying and selling them in enormous blocks of capital will have more difficulty answering the question, “What is your work for?”

Work can even isolate us from one another. “There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. ‘For whom am I toiling,’ he asked, ‘and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?’ This too is meaningless—a miserable business!” (Ecclesiastes 4:7–8). This man is “alone”—without friends or family—as a result of his work. Work can convince you that you are working hard for your family and friends while you are being seduced through ambition to neglect them.

Work involves “depriving”—delayed gratification and sacrifice. But he asks, “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of enjoyment?” In the end, he finds that working for his own sake is unrewarding. Commentator Derek Kidner adds: “This picture of lonely, pointless busyness . . . checks any excessive claim we might wish to make for the blessings of hard work.”

The Danger of Choice
Ecclesiastes says, “A person can do nothing better than to . . . find satisfaction in their own toil” (2:24). One of the reasons so many people find work to be unsatisfying is, ironically, that people today have more power to choose their line of work than did people in the past.

Recently David Brooks wrote in The New York Times about an online discussion conducted by a Stanford professor with students and recent graduates about why so many students from the most exclusive universities go into either finance or consulting. Some defended their pathways; others complained that “the smartest people should be fighting poverty, ending disease and serving others,
Brooks said that while the discussion was illuminating, he was struck by the unspoken assumptions. Many of these students seem to have a blinkered view of their options. There’s crass but affluent investment banking. There’s the poor but noble nonprofit world. And then there is the world of high-tech start-ups, which magically provides money and coolness simultaneously. But there was little interest in or awareness of the ministry, the military, the academy, government service or the zillion other sectors.

Furthermore, few students showed any interest in working for a company that actually makes products. . . . Community service has become a patch for morality. Many people today have not been given vocabularies to talk about what virtue is, what character consists of, and in which way excellence lies, so they just talk about community service. . . . In whatever field you go into, you will face greed, frustration and failure. You may find your life challenged by depression, alcoholism, infidelity, your own stupidity and self-indulgence. . . .

Furthermore . . . around what ultimate purpose should your life revolve? Are you capable of heroic self-sacrifice or is life just a series of achievement hoops? . . . You can devote your life to community service and be a total schmuck. You can spend your life on Wall Street and be a hero. Understanding heroism and schmuckdom requires fewer Excel spreadsheets, more Dostoyevsky and the Book of Job.

Brooks’s first point is that so many college students do not choose work that actually fits their abilities, talents, and capacities, but rather choose work that fits within their limited imagination of how they can boost their own self-image. There were only three high-status kinds of jobs—those that paid well, those that directly worked on society’s needs, and those that had the cool factor. Because there is no longer an operative consensus on the dignity of all work, still less on the idea that in all work we are the hands and fingers of God serving not themselves.”
the human community, in their minds they had an extremely limited range of career choices.

That means lots of young adults are choosing work that doesn’t fit them, or fields that are too highly competitive for most people to do well in. And this sets many people up for a sense of dissatisfaction or meaninglessness in their work. Perhaps it is related to the mobility of our urban culture and the resulting disruption of community, but in New York City many young people see the process of career selection more as the choice of an identity marker than a consideration of gifting and passions to contribute to the world.

One young man explained, “I chose management consulting because it is filled with sharp people—the kind of people I want to be around.” Another said, “I realized that if I stayed in education, I’d be embarrassed when I got to my five-year college reunion, so I’m going to law school now.” Where one’s identity in prior generations might come from being the son of so-and-so or living in a particular part of town or being a member of a church or club, today young people are seeking to define themselves by the status of their work.

*What wisdom, then, would the Bible give us in choosing our work? First, if we have the luxury of options, we would want to choose work that we can do well.* It should fit our gifts and our capacities. To take up work that we can do well is like cultivating our selves as gardens filled with hidden potential; it is to make the greatest room for the ministry of competence.

Second, because the main purpose of work is to serve the world, *we would want to choose work that benefits others.* We have to ask whether our work or organization or industry makes people better or appeals to the worst aspects of their characters. The answer will not always be black and white; in fact, the answer could differ from person to person.

In a volume on the Christian approach to vocation, John
Bernbaum and Simon Steer presented the case of Debbie, a woman who made a great deal of money working for an interior-decorating company in Aspen, Colorado. The craft of interior design, like architecture or the arts, is as positive way to promote human well-being. But she often found herself using resources in ways that she could not reconcile with pursuing the common good.

She left her career to work for a church and later for a U.S. senator. Debbie said, “Not that there was anything dishonest or illegal involved, but I was being paid on a commission basis—thirty percent of the gross profit. One client spent twenty thousand dollars [in the early 1980s] on furnishings for a ten-by-twelve [foot] room. I began to question my motivation for encouraging people to . . . spend huge sums of money on furniture. So . . . I decided to leave.”

This example is not about the value of the interior design profession or the commission form of compensation. Rather, it illustrates the need for everyone to work out in clear personal terms how their work serves the world. Someone else in the same situation might have chosen to stay, to focus on helping clients create beautiful homes, and to see the commissions as a legitimate expression of the value of that beauty.

*Third, if possible, we do not simply wish to benefit our family, benefit the human community, and benefit ourselves—we also want to benefit our field of work itself.* In Genesis 1 and 2, we saw that God not only cultivated his creation, but he created more cultivators. Likewise, our goal should not simply be to do work, but to increase the human race’s capacity to cultivate the created world.

It is a worthy goal to want to make a contribution to your discipline, if possible; to show a better, deeper, fairer, more skillful, more ennobling way of doing what you do. Dorothy Sayers explores this point in her famous essay “Why Work?” She acknowledges that we should work for “the common good” and “for others” (as we
observed in chapter 4), but she doesn’t want us to stop there. She says that the worker must “serve the work.”

The popular catchphrase of today is that it is everybody’s duty to serve the community, but . . . there is, in fact, a paradox about working to serve the community, and it is this: that to aim directly at serving the community is to falsify the work. . . . There are . . . very good reasons for this: [T]he moment you [only] think of serving other people, you begin to have a notion that other people owe you something for your pains; you begin to think that you have a claim on the community.

You will begin to bargain for reward, to angle for applause, and to harbor a grievance if you are not appreciated. But if your mind is set upon serving the work, then you know you have nothing to look for; the only reward the work can give you is the satisfaction of beholding its perfection. The work takes all and gives nothing but itself; and to serve the work is a labor of pure love. The only true way of serving the community is to be truly in sympathy with the community, to be oneself part of the community and then to serve the work. . . . It is the work that serves the community; the business of the worker is to serve the work.

Sayers’s point is well taken and not often made or understood. It is possible to imagine you are “serving the community” because what you do is popular—at least for a time. However, you may no longer be serving the community—you may be using it for the way its approval makes you feel. But if you do your work so well that by God’s grace it helps others who can never thank you, or it helps those who come after you to do it better, then you know you are “serving the work,” and truly loving your neighbor.

A Handful of Quietness
In the midst of Qoheleth’s gloom regarding the pointlessness of work,
a couple of gleams shine through. “There is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot” (Ecclesiastes 3:22). Yes, work is our inescapable “lot,” and so satisfaction in that realm is essential to a satisfactory life. But how do we get that satisfaction in light of all that we have against us? The answer: “to . . . find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God” (Ecclesiastes 3:13). How can we secure this gift?

Qoheleth provides a hint. Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 4:5–6 Qoheleth commends, literally, “one handful of quietness”—by contrast with two alternatives. One is the “two handfuls” of wealth that come from “toil and chasing after the wind” (verse 6b). The other is the “empty handful” of wealth that comes from the idleness of the fool who does not toil at all (verse 5).

Qoheleth concedes that satisfaction in work in a fallen world is always a miraculous gift of God—and yet we have a responsibility to pursue this gift through a particular balance. Tranquility without toil will not bring us satisfaction; neither will toil without tranquility. There will be both toil and tranquility. How we attain such a balanced life is one of the main themes of Scripture.

First, it means recognizing and renouncing our tendency to make idols of money and power (see Ecclesiastes 4:4—“I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind”). Second, it means putting relationships in their proper place (see Ecclesiastes 4:8—“There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother”), even though it probably means making less money (“one handful” rather than two). But most of all, it will mean pursuing something that is beyond the scope of Ecclesiastes to identify.

The New Testament reveals that the ultimate source of the
tranquility we seek is Jesus Christ, who—because he has toiled for us on the cross—can offer us the true rest for our souls (Matthew 11:28–30). Without the gospel of Jesus, we will have to toil not for the joy of serving others, nor the satisfaction of a job well done, but to make a name for ourselves.
