

## FIVE SMOOTH STONES – The Book of Ecclesiastes (or, The Preacher)

**Introduction: The book of Ecclesiastes** - The pastoral work of Nay-Saying (unmasking religious illusion and pious fraud in the context of providential blessing)

*The summary and aim of this book . . . is as follows: Solomon wants to put us at peace and to give us a quiet mind in the everyday affairs and business of this life, so that we live contentedly in the present without care and yearning about the future and are, as Paul says, without care and anxiety (Phil. 4:6). (Luther, p. 7)*

*God works in ways beyond our capacities. God speaks in ways that surpass our understanding. . . . Since "no one has seen God at any time" and the pastor is perfectly visible at most times, the expectations that people have of God are often focused on the pastor. . . . The pastor tells the stories, models the love, and administers the nourishment that proclaim and realize God's redemptive love for His people. . . . A pastor is able to work patiently and persistently, confident that when pastoral counsel and proclamation are sound, persons who are serious about their life with God will finally receive the salvation / wholeness that they need.*

*But . . . we realize that we are not the only ones to whom people come for help in completing God-related expectations. We work on a street teeming with competition. . . . Pastors are in the awkward position of refusing to give what a great many people assume it is our assigned job to give. We are in the embarrassing position of disappointing people in what they think they have a perfect right to get from us. We are asked to pray for an appropriate miracle; we are called upon to declare an authoritative answer. But our calling . . . forbids us to engage in either the miracle business or the answer business (Peterson, pp. 149-153)*

### **The Text – "Vanity of Vanities" - Ecclesiastes 1:1-2**

דְּבַרִּי קִהְלֵת בְּיָדָיו מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַם: (1)

הַגֵּל הַבָּלִים אָמַר קִהְלֵת הַגֵּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הָבֵל: (2)

The words of the **Teacher**, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

<sup>2</sup> "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the **Teacher**.

"Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." (NIV)

The words of the **Preacher**, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> **Vanity of vanities**, saith the **Preacher**, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. (KJV)

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The words of the **spokesman**, the **son of David** and the king in Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> “**Absolutely pointless!**” says the **spokesman**. “Absolutely pointless! Everything is pointless.” (*GOD’S WORD*)

These are the words of the **Philosopher**, **David’s son**, who was king in Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> It is **useless, useless**, said the **Philosopher**. Life is useless, all useless. (*Good News Translation*)

The author: Solomon[a] of Jerusalem, **King David’s son**, “**The Preacher**.” <sup>2</sup> In my opinion, **nothing is worthwhile**; everything is futile. (*Living Bible – note: TLB footnote [a] assumes that this is an implied identification*)

Estas son las palabras **del Maestro**, **hijo de David**, rey en Jerusalén. <sup>2</sup> Lo más absurdo de lo absurdo, —dice **el Maestro**—, lo más absurdo de lo absurdo, **itodo es un absurdo!** (*Nueva Version Internacional*)

Dies sind die Reden des **Predigers**, **des Sohnes Davids**, des Königs zu Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> Es ist **alles ganz eitel**, sprach der **Prediger**, es ist alles ganz eitel. (*Luther, 1545*)

**בְּנֵי דָוִד (Son of David)** – Solomon was the immediate son of David, and the wisest. However, further descendants of David would also have sometimes been referred to as “sons of David.” Proverbs 1:1 explicitly says that Solomon is the author of the book; so does Song of Songs. Ecclesiastes is nowhere that specific. In fact, since the New Testament often refers to Jesus as “the son of David” (Matthew 11:1, 9:7, 15:22, 21:9, 22:42; Mark 10:47-48; Luke 3:31), **is it possible to imagine that the words of Ecclesiastes find their fulfillment in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ?**

**קְהָלֵת (Teacher/Preacher)** – The New Testament word for “Teacher” is “Rabbi.” The Hebrew root **qhl** means “to gather”; “*The Qohemoth, then is ‘an assembler of people into the presence of God’*” (Peterson, p. 156). IMHO the translation “philosopher” makes me think too much of Aristotle and Socrates; and the translation “spokesman” makes me think too much of Sean Spicer.

**הַבָּל הַבָּלִים** – “Something is always lost in translation” – here, it’s the wonderful rhythm of the phrase (say it like “HEH-vel ha-VAH-leem”, quickly). Not many translations are close to this, but here are a few:

- Vanitas vanitatem (Latin)
- Gwagedd o wagedd (Welsh)
- Cyeta cyet! (Russian)

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*Let us learn, therefore, to submit ourselves to the counsels of God and to refrain from the cares and thoughts that God has not commanded. (Luther, p. 25)*

### **The Text – “I, the Teacher” (Eccl. 1)**

I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens.

What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! <sup>14</sup> I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

<sup>15</sup> *What is crooked cannot be straightened;  
what is lacking cannot be counted.*

<sup>16</sup> I said to myself, “Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.” <sup>17</sup> Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

<sup>18</sup> *For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;  
the more knowledge, the more grief.*

**Eccl. 12:9** Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. <sup>10</sup> The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.

### **The Author – Kohelet/Qoheleth (The Preacher)**

*The precise historical setting in which Qoheleth wrote is not known. . . . the writer is a question mark and the times in which he wrote a haze. . . . And so in the absence of hard historical data it is not out of place, I think, to conjecture a religious situation that fits what is known of Qoheleth’s century, namely, that it was a peacetime culture of moderate prosperity in which religion, unaggravated by serious conflict, goes to seed. . . . Under such conditions two things developed that, if unchecked, would have been (and nearly were) the death of healthy, biblical faith: overconfident wisdom (sure that it knows God’s mind better than He does Himself) and nervous apocalyptic (sure that doomsday is just around the corner). (Peterson, pp. 154).*

*The pastor reads Ecclesiastes to get scrubbed clean from illusion and sentiment, from ideas that are idolatrous and feelings that cloy. It is an expose and rejection of every pretentious and presumptuous expectation aimed at God and routed through the pastor. (Peterson, pp. 155-156)*

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*The point and purpose of this book is to instruct us, so that with thanksgiving we may use the things that are present and the creatures of God that are generously given to us and conferred upon us by the blessing of God. This we are to do without anxiety about the things that are still in the future. (Luther, p. 10)*

**Exercise:** Can you think of current-day examples of people / organizations who seem full of “overconfident wisdom”? Can you think of current-day examples of people / organizations who seem sure that doomsday is just around the corner?

### **The Text – “Turn, turn, turn” – Ecclesiastes 3**

#### **Ecclesiastes 3 (Pete Seeger and the Smothers Brothers)**

#### **Ecclesiastes 3 (The Byrds)**

*All human works and efforts have a certain and definite time of acting, of beginning, and of ending, beyond human control. Thus this is spoken in opposition to free will. . . . Everything comes and goes at the time that God has appointed. . . . To Christians this is a great comfort, so that they know that death has not been placed into the power of tyrants nor into the hands of any creature and so that they are not extremely fearful about death but die like children when it pleases God. (Luther, p. 48, 51)*

### **The Text – “I Commend Enjoyment”**

A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God. (Eccl. 2:24)

That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. (Eccl. 3:13)

So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun. (Eccl. 8:15)

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. <sup>8</sup> Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. <sup>9</sup> Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. <sup>10</sup> Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead,

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where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. (Eccl. 9:7-10)

No matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 1:20)

**EXERCISE** – how does this verse from 2 Corinthians transform and fulfill the verses from Ecclesiastes?

*The pastor has the responsibility to nurture the affirmative without encouraging the gullible; to keep people alert and prepared to say yes to every yes of God in every part of existence without at the same time being a patsy for every confidence game in town; to train people in robust acceptance of what God brings to us and not to passively submit to the trashy merchandising of religious salespeople. (Peterson, pp. 163-164)*

### **The Text – “Wisdom or grief?” – Eccl. 1:18**

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;  
the more knowledge, the more grief. (Ecclesiastes 1:18)

*The people who pose religious question are sincere enough. But they are also, very often, only peripherally interested in God. Information about God? Yes. Useful insights derivative from God? Yes. But God? No. They sidestep the biblical knowledge that always involves intimacy and commitment. They maintain a conveniently safe distance between themselves and the commands of God. But they ask questions.*

*When religious knowledge becomes an impersonal item of information, or is used impersonally, it ceases to be biblical. If it used to put distance between persons, something has gone wrong. If it is used to put another person in his or her “place,” something has gone wrong. If it is used to improve life apart from faith in God, something has gone wrong. (Peterson, pp. 171-173)*

**EXERCISE** – “The people who pose religious questions” mentioned above often begin their questions with “Pastor, don’t you think that . . .?”

1. Can you name three groups of people in the New Testament who fit the description in these paragraphs? (HINT: Matthew 12:1-2; Matthew 22:23ff; Acts 15)
2. Can you identify two or three general types of people who fit the description in these paragraphs? (HINT: Complete this sentence – “The kind of person who \_\_\_\_\_”)

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### The Text - "The End of the Matter . . . Fear God" Eccl. 12:13-14

Now all has been heard;  
here is the conclusion of the matter:  
Fear God and keep his commandments,  
for this is the duty of all mankind.  
<sup>14</sup> For God will bring every deed into judgment,  
including every hidden thing,  
whether it is good or evil. (Eccl. 12:13-14)

*Ecclesiastes is the Old Testament equivalent to the New Testament's empty tomb. . . . In the same way that the Psalms are an appropriate conclusion to the New Testament, Ecclesiastes is an appropriate introduction. People bring so many mistaken expectations to the gospel, so much silly sentiment, and so many petulant demands, that they hardly hear its real message or confront its actual promise. Qoheleth gets rid of all that. He empties us of the inner noise that we supposed was religion and the cluttered piety we supposed was faith. He throws out the accumulated religious junk and banishes the fraud that has paraded as faith. (Peterson, pp. 186-188)*

**The Context** – Sukkoth (the Feast of Tabernacles / Booths)

[Shalom Sesame: Noam's Sukkot](#)   [Sukkoth and Ecclesiastes](#)

[The Lego Sukkoth movie](#)

### The Five Smooth Stones - 1 Samuel 17 – David goes to fight Goliath

<sup>38</sup> Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. <sup>39</sup> David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them. "I cannot go in these," he said to Saul, "because I am not used to them." So he took them off. <sup>40</sup> Then he took his staff in his hand, **chose five smooth stones from the stream**, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

### Resources:

Luther, Martin. *Notes on Ecclesiastes*. Translated by Jaroslav Pelikan. Luther's Works, American Edition Vol. 15. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972.

Peterson, Eugene. *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.

Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*. Simon and Schuster, 2010.

**The Next Megillah - Esther** - *The pastoral work of Community-Building (becoming a celebrative community of faith in the environment of the world's hostility)*

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*The scrolls were the applied wisdom of the pastoral office to a people who had come together to pay attention to their life together with God. Song of Songs was read at Passover, Ruth at Pentecost, Lamentations on the Ninth of Ab, Ecclesiastes at Tabernacles, and Esther at Purim. (Peterson, p. 14-15)*

Peterson describes each of these as follows:

**Song of Songs** - *The pastoral work of Prayer-Directing (learning how to love and pray in the context of salvation)*

**Ruth** - *The pastoral work of Story-Making (developing an identity as a person of faith in the context of God's covenant)*

**Lamentations** - *The pastoral work of Pain-Sharing (dealing with suffering in the context of redemptive judgment)*

**Ecclesiastes** - *The pastoral work of Nay-Saying (unmasking religious illusion and pious fraud in the context of providential blessing)*

**Esther** - *The pastoral work of Community-Building (becoming a celebrative community of faith in the environment of the world's hostility)*