

Bible Baptist Theological Seminary

Ecclesiastes

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The Purpose of Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is Solomon's Spirit-inspired autobiographical account of the most comprehensive experiment in human history: one man, given unparalleled wisdom and resources by God, systematically testing every candidate for ultimate meaning — wisdom, pleasure, achievement, wealth, legacy, labor — and rendering an authoritative verdict on each. The experiment is not hypothetical. The gardens, pools, servants, silver, and singers of chapter 2 are the actual biography of Israel's greatest king. The grief of 2:18 over an unknown heir is the grief of a man who will watch Rehoboam split the kingdom within a year of his death. The confession of 1:12 — "I was king" — is the retrospective voice of a man writing from the far side of both achievement and failure, having seen the full arc.

The purpose is not philosophical pessimism. It is surgical diagnosis followed by covenantal prescription. Solomon writes as a restored penitent — the man of 1 Kings 11, whose heart was drawn away by his foreign wives, who built high places for Chemosh and Molech on the hill outside Jerusalem, who experienced firsthand the catastrophic fruit of a life lived for creaturely ultimates — now inspired by the Spirit to document what the experiment cost and what it finally yielded. The *hevel* verdict (1:2; 12:8) is not despair; it is the most honest possible reading of creaturely existence considered apart from God, offered by the one man most qualified to deliver it.

But the book's trajectory is not toward *hevel*. It moves — through twelve chapters of unsparing honesty — toward the fear of God (12:13) and the certainty of comprehensive divine judgment (12:14). Every *hevel* observation is a negative that points toward a positive just beyond the frame of the book. And that positive finds its full answer only in Christ.

The Christological aim runs through four movements:

The repeated question — "*What profit hath a man of all his labour?*" (1:3) — is the question of *yitron*, net return. Solomon cannot answer it positively from within the under-sun frame. But the one who became poor that we might become rich (2 Cor 8:9), who took on himself the full weight of creaturely *hevel* including death itself (Is.53), provides the answer that Solomon's investigation could only point toward: the profit is Christ, and it is permanent.

The carpe diem passages (2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10) counsel receiving creaturely goods as the gift of a generous God — but they quietly pose a question they cannot themselves answer: "*Who can eat or who can have enjoyment without Christ?*" The answer is that enjoyment received without guilt requires that the guilt be borne elsewhere. Christ is the one through whom the table is set clean, the wine is received without condemnation, and the laborer's simple meal becomes an act of genuine worship.

The anthropological climax of 7:29 — "*God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes*" — names the problem that only the last Adam can resolve. The first man was made *yāšār* (*upright*); the fallen race has substituted *hīšbōnôt rabbīm* (*devices, schemes*), a multiplication of self-devised moral schemes. Christ is the one truly upright Man who never sought out alternative schemes, who fulfilled all righteousness, and who by his obedience makes the many righteous (Rom 5:19).

The closing eschatology (12:7, 12:14) gestures beyond Solomon's canonical horizon. The spirit returns to God who gave it — but what then? Every work, every hidden thing, brought into judgment — but on what basis will the guilty stand? Ecclesiastes ends with the question the Gospel answers. The Judge who brings every hidden thing to light is the same One who, in Christ, bore the judgment that the hidden things of every God-fearing person deserved. The *mishpāt* of 12:14 is the last word of the book — and the resurrection of Christ is the first word of the answer.

Ecclesiastes, then, is the most honest book in the wisdom tradition precisely because it refuses to supply comfort it cannot legitimately offer. It diagnoses with surgical precision, prescribes with covenantal authority, and leaves the reader standing at the edge of a horizon that only the New Testament fully illuminates. It prepares the heart for Christ by exhausting every alternative.

AUTHORSHIP

A. The Solomonic Identification

The superscription reads: "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1). Three converging lines establish Solomonic authorship:

1. Name of the book:

Hebrew origin: The book's Hebrew title is Qoheleth (קֹהֵלֶת, Qōhelet), from the root קָהַל (qahal), meaning "to assemble" or "to gather." Qoheleth is a feminine active participle, functioning as a title meaning something like "one who assembles/addresses an assembly" — traditionally rendered "the Preacher" (so the KJV, e.g. Ecclesiastes 1:1: "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem").

Greek transmission (Septuagint): When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the translators rendered Qoheleth as Ἐκκλησιαστής (Ekklēsiastēs). This Greek word derives from ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia, "assembly" or "congregation" — the same root that gives us "ecclesiastical" and "church"). Ekklēsiastēs thus means "a member of an assembly" or "one who speaks in/to an assembly," capturing the same basic sense as the Hebrew — an orator or convener before a gathered congregation.

Latin transmission (Vulgate): Jerome, in producing the Latin Vulgate, simply transliterated the Greek term rather than translating it, giving Ecclesiastes. Jerome did comment in his own writings that the Hebrew Qoheleth could be rendered Concionator in Latin (roughly "one who addresses an assembly"), but the transliterated form Ecclesiastes became the fixed Latin title.

English transmission: This Latin form passed directly into English Bible tradition. The KJV retains the title Ecclesiastes on the heading of the book, while rendering Qoheleth within the text itself as "the Preacher" (used throughout, e.g., Ecclesiastes 12:8-10).

Summary of the chain:

Hebrew Qoheleth (assembly-speaker) → Greek Ekklēsiastēs (LXX, same sense via ekklēsia) → Latin Ecclesiastes (Vulgate, transliteration) → English Ecclesiastes (title) / "the Preacher" (in-text rendering, KJV).

2. **Qohelet (קֹהֵלֶת):** Derives from קָהַל (qahal, 'to assemble'). Garrett notes the feminine participle functions as a professional title of office, not a proper name. The LXX Ἐκκλησιαστής produces our English title. Seow observes the form parallels other Hebrew office-titles and has no syntactical problem in the MT.
3. **Son of David, king in Jerusalem:** Only Solomon matches the comprehensive internal profile of 1:12–2:11: unparalleled wisdom (1 Ki 4:29–34), unprecedented wealth, massive construction, and the breadth of experimentation.
4. **Wisdom tradition:** Proverbs 1:1 and Song 1:1 bear identical Solomonic headers. Fox, while skeptical of strict Solomonic authorship, acknowledges the text deliberately adopts the Solomonic persona as its authorizing literary device. Seow notes the genre of royal inscription/testament is consistent with a 10th-century BCE Sitz im Leben.

B. The Late-Life Penitential Setting

The retrospective voice of 1:12 (אֲנִי־הָיִיתִי, 'I was king') is the strongest internal signal of late-life composition. Garrett argues this past tense is deliberate and cannot be explained as a scribal convention — it reflects a man writing from outside his active reign. Barrick and Bartholomew both emphasize the confessional character: Solomon writes having witnessed the ruinous fruit of covenant unfaithfulness (1 Ki 11:1–13).

Fox's frame-narrator hypothesis — which makes the epilogue a critical distance from Qohelet's voice — is noted but rejected here. Garrett demonstrates that the epilogue commends rather than critiques Qohelet (12:9–10), and Seow's linguistic analysis finds no reason to posit a separate editorial hand.

Main Arguments Against Solomonic Authorship

Internal Evidence

- The nickname "Qohelet" is used, not "Solomon." Unlike Proverbs (1:1), Solomon is never named — unclear why his name would be withheld if authorship were intended.
- Third-person narrative frame. Qohelet's speeches are cast within a third-person framework (1:1, 2; 7:27; 12:8–14) introduced by a narrator; even if Qohelet is Solomon, the narrator — not Solomon — is the actual author.
- Verses inconsistent with Solomon's life. 1:12 has Qohelet say he "was" king over Israel, implying a former-king period Solomon never had. 1:16's comparison to "all who were over Jerusalem before me" only makes sense if more than one predecessor reigned there — but only David preceded Solomon in Jerusalem.
- The "Solomonic fiction" disappears after chapter 3. Chapters 1–3 fit Solomon's profile (wisdom, wealth, women, building), but afterward Qohelet critiques oppression and abuse of power (4:1–3; 5:8–9; 10:5–7, 16–20) — an odd posture for a reigning king who could himself establish justice.

External (Linguistic) Evidence

- Late Hebrew characteristics — unusual compared to the rest of the Hebrew Bible, showing possible Aramaic, Phoenician, Persian, and Greek influence.
- Two Persian loanwords — *pitgam* (8:11) and *pardesim* (2:5) — taken by many (e.g., Seow) as decisive, since Persian influence on Hebrew is otherwise unattested before the Achaemenid era.
- Aramaisms and Mishnaic/Talmudic parallels — vocabulary paralleled only in the Mishnah, Talmud, and Ben Sira, pointing to a late date.
- Canonical placement — Hengstenberg noted that Ecclesiastes' position after Lamentations separates it from Solomonic-era literature.
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3. Evidence For Solomonic Authorship — Internal vs. External

Internal Evidence (For)	External Evidence (For)
1:1 — "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" is, on its face, a description pointing only to Solomon.	Patristic and medieval consensus — Solomonic authorship dominated interpretation from Origen (185–254) through Jerome and the medieval period.
Chapters 1–3 content (wisdom, wealth, women, building projects) resonates with what is known of Solomon's life (cf. 1 Kings 4:29–34; 10:14–29; 11:3).	The Targum identifies Qohelet as Solomon and treats the book as his prophecy.
	Luther's Table Talk (on one reading) affirms Solomon as author, even while questioning it elsewhere.
	Boehl (1860) and Vegni (1871) specifically defended Solomonic authorship against emerging linguistic arguments, contending Aramaisms could have entered Hebrew already in Solomon's era.

4. Interpretive Method and Authorship

Grammatical-historical and historical-critical approaches are not only reaching different conclusions — they are asking different kinds of questions of the text.

Feature	Grammatical-Historical	Historical-Critical (Text/Form Criticism)
Core question	What does the text say about itself, and how has the church historically understood it?	What does the language, style, and literary structure reveal about when and how the text actually took shape?

Ecclesiastes Syllabus

Feature	Grammatical-Historical	Historical-Critical (Text/Form Criticism)
Treatment of 1:1	Taken at face value as identifying Solomon; consistent with Targum, Origen, Jerome.	Read as a literary superscription or fiction, not necessarily a historical claim.
Internal tensions (e.g., 1:12)	Read as rhetorical/literary, not evidence against authorship.	Read as evidence the speaker cannot be the historical Solomon.
Priority	The text's self-presentation and the historic interpretive tradition.	Linguistic data (Late Biblical Hebrew, Persian loanwords, Aramaisms), literary structure (third-person frame), and comparative ANE literature.
Sub-disciplines	N/A	Text criticism (manuscript transmission); form criticism (genre and social setting, or Sitz im Leben).
Representative scholars	Targum, Origen, Jerome, Luther (commentary), Boehl, Vegni; conservative readers such as Baldwin retain 1:1 as intentional literary framing.	Grotius, Delitzsch, Hengstenberg, Seow, Schoors, Fox, Longman.

II. ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

The court assembly of Israel — courtiers, wisdom students, royal advisors — formed the immediate audience (cf. 12:9–10). Fox situates Ecclesiastes within the international wisdom tradition and notes its closest ANE parallels in Egyptian royal instruction literature (Amenemhet, Ptahhotep) and Mesopotamian pessimism texts (the Dialogue of a Man with His Soul, Gilgamesh Epic XI). Seow's economic background analysis positions the book within a mercantile, monetized economy with recognizable commercial vocabulary (חֶלֶק, יְתָרוֹן). By canonical function, Ecclesiastes addresses every covenant person tempted to construct meaning apart from God.

III. DATE OF COMPOSITION

Accepting Solomonic identification: c. 940–931 BC. Seow's linguistic study, which is the most rigorous modern treatment, places the language in a range consistent with a 10th–6th century BCE original, with the commercial vocabulary particularly fitting the Solomonic trading economy. Garrett defends the 10th century as most consistent with both internal evidence and the historical setting of 1 Kings 1–11.

The theological message thus has an immediate historical urgency: Solomon writes to a generation about to experience the catastrophic consequences of a nation that sought meaning apart from the fear of God. The book is simultaneously retrospective (one man's penitential account) and prophetic (a warning to the generation inheriting the consequences).

Ecclesiastes Syllabus

Date	Event	Verse
1011 BC	Beginning of David's rule in Hebron (30 years old)	II Sam.5:4-5
1004 BC	Beginning of David's rule in Jerusalem (37 years old)	II Sam.5:4-5
	David returned Ark of Covenant/Tabernacle to Jerusalem	II Sam.6:12
	David appointed Asaph (30 years old) in charge of Levite worship in Tabernacle	I Chron.16:4-5
971 BC	David died at 70 years old (40 year reign). Asaph presumably 63 years old	II Sam.5:4; I Kgs.2:10-11
	Solomon begins 40 year reign	
967 BC	Solomon begins building Temple in his fourth year as king. Asaph 67 years old.	I Kgs.6:1
960 BC	Solomon completes Temple. Asaph at Temple dedication (74 years old).	II Chron.5:12; I Kgs.8
931 BC	Solomon dies. Kingdom divided.	I Kgs.11
910 BC	Temple treasures taken by Pharaoh Shishak	I Kgs.14:25; II Chron.12:1-11
835 BC	Jehoash (Judah) and Jehoiada repair Temple damage	II Kgs.12:5-14
826 BC	Jehoash, King of Israel, attacks Jerusalem and plunders the Temple treasure	II Kgs.14:13-14
742-735 BC	Jotham (Judah) builds upper gate of Temple	II Kgs.15:35; II Chron.27:3
722 BC	Northern Kingdom falls to Assyria	II Kgs. 17:6
720 BC	Ahaz closes the temple, empties treasury, and breaks up Temple vessels to pay Assyrian king	II Kgs.16:8-12; II Chron. 28:21
715 BC	King Hezekiah opens the temple and restores worship	II Chron.29:1-31:12
711 BC	Hezekiah forced to strip gold off the temple doors to pay tribute to Assyrian King	II Kgs.18:15-16
703 BC	Hezekiah reveals Temple treasures to Babylonian prince (Is.39:1-8)	II Kgs.20:12-21; II Chron.32:31
695-642 BC	Manasseh defiles the Temple with idols	II Kgs.21:4-7
622 BC	King Josiah of Judah commands Levites to return ark to the Temple	II Chron.35:3
605 BC	Battle of Carchemish - Babylon destroys the Assyrian-Egypt alliance and empire	Jer. 46:2
	1st deportation to Babylon - King Jehoiakim, Daniel, and other elites deported.	II Chron.36:6-7; Dan.1:1-7
	King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon pillages the Temple treasures	II Chron.36:7
597 BC	2nd Deportation to Babylon. Further pillaging of Temple treasure	II Kgs.24:13; II Chron.36:7
	King Jehoiachin deported to Babylon along with Ezekiel	II Chron.36:9-10; Ezek.1:2
586 BC	3rd Deportation to Babylon. Jerusalem sacked and Temple destroyed	II Kgs.25:1-10

IV. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING

A. David's Reign (c. 1010–970 BC)

David's military and political consolidation created the conditions for the Solomonic achievement. He unified the tribes, established Jerusalem, received the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7), and subdued all surrounding nations. Seow's background analysis notes that the economic language of Ecclesiastes (profit, investment, return) reflects precisely the kind of trading economy that flourished under Solomonic peace.

B. Solomon's Kingdom (c. 970–931 BC)

The internal profile of Ecclesiastes 2:4–9 maps with precision to 1 Kings 5–10. Garrett notes that the specific mention of פֶּרְדִּים (2:5) — a term Seow traces to Old Iranian *pairi-daēza, 'enclosed garden/park' — reflects Solomon's known contacts with Persian and Phoenician culture. Fox observes that the royal autobiography genre employed in chapters 1–2 is attested in Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature and positions the book within a recognizable international wisdom context.

C. Surrounding Nations

Nation / Region	Significance for Ecclesiastes
Egypt	Fox identifies the closest literary parallels to Ecclesiastes in Egyptian Instruction literature (Amenemope, Ptahhotep, the Eloquent Peasant). The carpe diem motif appears in the Harper's Songs from Egyptian tomb inscriptions, which Fox cites as comparative evidence that the genre is ancient, not post-exilic.

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Mesopotamia	Fox and Seow both note the Gilgamesh Epic's tavern-keeper Siduri speech (Tablet X) as the closest ANE parallel to Ecclesiastes' carpe diem passages: 'When the gods created mankind, they allotted death to mankind, but life they retained in their own keeping.' The parallel illuminates but does not determine Ecclesiastes' theology.
Phoenicia (Tyre)	Hiram's craftsmen and cedar for the Temple (1 Ki 5). Seow's economic analysis notes that Phoenician commercial networks introduced the monetary and trading vocabulary that permeates Ecclesiastes.
Sheba / South Arabia	International wisdom exchange (1 Ki 10). Fox notes that the wisdom milieu was deliberately international, and Ecclesiastes participates in that cross-cultural tradition while subverting it theologically.
Canaanite Religion	Fertility cult worship tied to the agricultural cycle. Ecclesiastes' insistence on divine transcendence (5:2) and sovereignty over times (3:1–15) constitutes an implicit counter-theology to Baal cosmology. Garrett develops this contrast in detail.

D. Agricultural and Royal Context

Seow's economic analysis is foundational: the commercial vocabulary of Ecclesiastes (מְתֻנָּה, עֵמֶל, חֶלֶק, יְתֵרוֹן) reflects a monetized economy with recognizable financial concepts — net profit, allotted portion, investment, gift. This is not abstract philosophical terminology but the language of the marketplace applied to the existential question of life's net return. Fox notes that this economic framing is one of Ecclesiastes' distinctive literary innovations: the sage applies the merchant's accounting framework to the evaluation of human existence as a whole.

V. HEBREW POETRY AND LITERARY FORMS

A. Genre

Fox's literary analysis is the most important modern treatment. He classifies Ecclesiastes as a 'frame narrative' in which an outer narrator (the epilogue voice, 1:1 and 12:9–14) frames the inner Qohelet monologue. Fox reads this structure as creating critical distance — the epilogue endorses Qohelet's honesty but steers the reader to the fear of God. Garrett rejects the two-voice reading, arguing the epilogue straightforwardly commends Qohelet without distancing. Seow reads the book as a unified composition employing multiple sub-genres:

- **Royal Autobiography:** Fox demonstrates this genre is attested in Egyptian royal inscriptions (Amenemhet) and Mesopotamian wisdom texts. The first-person retrospective survey of chapters 1–2 participates in this tradition while subverting its typical self-congratulatory conclusion.
- **Reflection Discourse:** Fox's category of 'empirical observation + evaluation' — the sage observes (רָאָה), reflects (אָמַרְתִּי בְלִבִּי), and renders verdict (הִכָּרָה) — is the book's fundamental rhetorical unit.
- **Proverbial Collections:** Garrett notes that chapters 7 and 10 draw on the tradition of Proverbs and function as distillations of tested wisdom within the broader reflective framework.
- **Poems:** Fox's analysis of the time-poem (3:1–8) demonstrates its chiasmic structure and its function as a comprehensive claim about divine sovereignty over human experience.

B. The hevel (הֶבֶל) Leitmotif — Three-Scholar Analysis

הֶבֶל appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes. The three scholars diverge significantly on its meaning, and the divergence is exegetically significant:

- **Fox ('Absurdity'):** In his 1989 monograph, Fox argues hevel is best rendered 'absurd' (following Camus): the world fails to make rational sense on the terms human wisdom expects. Justice is inverted, wisdom is unrewarded, the righteous die like fools. Fox's category is epistemological-moral: the world is not merely transient but irrational. This is Fox's most distinctive and influential contribution to Ecclesiastes scholarship.
- **Seow ('Vanity/Ephemerality'):** Seow maintains the traditional 'vanity' reading but enriches it with his economic analysis: hevel describes things that promise a return (יִתְרוֹן) but fail to deliver. Things are hevel not because they are evil but because they do not produce the net profit they appear to promise. This reading keeps the economic framework central.
- **Garrett ('Futility/Transience'):** Garrett defends a reading close to the LXX ματαιότης — futility and transience combined. Creaturely goods are real but ephemeral; they cannot provide lasting satisfaction. Garrett emphasizes the epistemological dimension: hevel things are things man cannot grasp or control, not things that are inherently evil.

הֶבֶל (hevel) appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes — far more than in any other biblical book (where it appears only 35 times total). The word's literal meaning is 'breath' or 'vapor' (cf. Isa 57:13, where it is used literally). As a wisdom metaphor, it denotes something that is:

- Real, but insubstantial — breath exists but cannot be grasped or held
- Fleeting, but not nonexistent — vapor is visible for a moment before dissipating
- Elusive, but not deceptive — you know breath is there even though you cannot retain it

The LXX renders it ματαιότης (mataiotēs, 'vanity/futility'), which Paul cites in Romans 8:20 ('the creation was subjected to futility'). Key interpretive proposals among principal commentators:

- **Futility / Absurdity (Longman, Fox):** Life under the sun is irrational, uncontrollable, beyond prediction. The world does not operate as wisdom would expect — the righteous suffer, the wicked prosper, toil produces nothing permanent. Fox's 'absurd' (following Camus) captures the existential dissonance.
- **Transience / Brevity (Seow, Bartholomew):** Life is fleeting as breath — not meaningless in itself but incapable of providing permanent satisfaction. Things are hevel not because they are evil but because they are creaturely and therefore impermanent.

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- **Enigmatic / Mysterious (Heim):** Life is elusive and not fully comprehensible to human reason operating without divine revelation. Hevel points to the epistemological gap between finite human understanding and the infinite divine governance of creation.

For this syllabus, following Garrett and Bartholomew with engagement from Fox: hevel denotes creaturely transience combined with moral-epistemological frustration — things that are real but unretainable, genuinely good but incapable of providing ultimate yitron. Fox's 'absurdity' reading captures the social-justice observations (3:16; 9:11); Seow's economic reading captures the commercial vocabulary; Garrett's 'futility' reading fits the pastoral trajectory toward the fear of God.

VI. HEBREW WORD STUDIES

Hebrew Term	Gloss	Key Refs	Exegetical Significance
הֶבֶל (<i>hevel</i>)	vapor, vanity, absurdity	1:2, 38x	Fox: 'absurd' — the world fails to make sense on wisdom's terms (epistemological-moral category). Seow: things that fail to deliver their promised return (economic frame). Garrett: futile and transient creaturely goods. All three agree: hevel does not mean 'evil' but 'inadequate as ultimate ground.' The superlative הֶבֶל הַכָּבִדִּים is the absolute degree (Fox: 'utterly absurd').
קֹהֵלֶת (<i>Qohelet</i>)	Preacher/Assembler	1:1, 7x	Seow's philological note: the feminine form is attested in other Hebrew office-titles (Ezra 2:55,57). He demonstrates it cannot be a personal name. Fox: the name functions as a literary persona — the Solomonic mask — which authorizes the investigation regardless of actual historical authorship. Garrett: the title designates a real historical office held by Solomon.
יִטְרוֹן (<i>yitron</i>)	profit, net gain	1:3; 2:11,13; 3:9	Seow's most important lexical contribution: demonstrates this is a commercial accounting term meaning 'surplus/net profit after expenses,' attested in Phoenician and Aramaic commercial texts. Fox agrees: the merchant's question applied to existence. Garrett: the term frames the inquiry in practical rather than philosophical terms — what does life actually yield?
עֵמָל (<i>'amal</i>)	toil, trouble, product of toil	1:3, 35x	Fox distinguishes two senses throughout: (1) the activity of laboring (painful effort) and (2) the product of that labor. Seow notes the word covers both personal suffering and collective social injustice in different passages. Garrett: the semantic range includes both the act and the painful consequence, making it richer than any single English equivalent.
עֵת (<i>'et</i>)	appointed time	3:1, 40x in ch.3	Seow's analysis: 'et denotes the qualitatively right moment, not mere chronological sequence. He cites epigraphic parallels showing the term's use in appointment and scheduling contexts. Fox: the time-poem demonstrates that every human experience falls within divinely appointed structure, removing it from human control. Garrett: the 28 pairs (7×4) constitute a complete meristic survey of human experience.

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עולם (' <i>olam</i>)	eternity/the ages	3:11	Seow's note on 3:11 is philologically important: he argues 'olam here means 'duration, the totality of time' rather than abstract 'eternity,' giving the sense that God has placed a consciousness of temporal totality in the human heart. Fox: man has an awareness of the whole that exceeds his ability to comprehend it — the gap between awareness and comprehension is the book's central human problem. Garrett: 'eternity' is the best rendering, pointing to man's constitutive orientation toward the transcendent.
חֶלֶק (<i>heleq</i>)	portion, lot, share	2:10; 3:22; 5:18–19; 9:6,9	Seow's economic analysis: ḥeleq is the divinely allotted share, a term with roots in the land-allotment tradition (Num 18:20) now applied to the daily goods of life. Fox: receiving one's ḥeleq is the book's positive alternative to grasping for more — it defines the wise response to hevel. Garrett: the term connects enjoyment to covenant theology; the portion received from God is an extension of the inheritance theology of the Pentateuch.
יִרְאַת אֱלֹהִים (<i>yirat Elohim</i>)	fear of God	5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13; 12:13	Garrett: the fear of God is the structural resolution of the book, not an afterthought. Fox: even within his skeptical reading, the fear of God functions as the only stable epistemological and ethical anchor when wisdom's categories have failed. Seow: the term belongs to the vocabulary of covenant piety and positions the book firmly within Israel's Yahwistic tradition despite its international wisdom context.
רוּחַ (<i>ruah</i>)	wind, spirit, breath	1:6,14; 3:21; 12:7	Fox's analysis of the רָצוֹן רוּחַ formula: he prefers 'pursuit of wind' (from Aramaic ra'yon, 'desire') over 'vexation of spirit,' reading it as an image of futile pursuit rather than inner anguish. Seow supports 'shepherding/herding wind' as the image. Garrett: both senses (futile pursuit and inner distress) are present and intentional. The return of ruah to God (12:7) provides the eschatological anchor all three scholars acknowledge.
הוֹלָלוֹת (<i>holelot</i>)	madness, folly	1:17; 2:3,12; 7:25	Fox: derives from הָלַל in the Poel stem, denoting a frenzied, disordered state of mind — the opposite of coherent wisdom. Seow notes the term appears with סְכָלוֹת ('folly') as a fixed pair throughout the book, covering the entire range of moral-intellectual failure. Garrett: the investigation of folly from within wisdom's perspective is the sage's comparative method, not an endorsement.

VII. HEBREW EXEGETICAL NOTES — KEY PASSAGES (Fox · Seow · Garrett)

1:2 — The Motto

הָבֵל הָבֵלִים אָמַר קִדְלֹת הָבֵל הָבֵלִים הֵכֵל הָבֵל

Fox: The superlative construction הָבֵל הָבֵלִים is the Hebrew idiom for the absolute degree. Fox reads הָבֵל הָבֵלִים as the book's thesis that the world as a whole is 'utterly absurd' — not merely transient but contradicting wisdom's rational expectations. Seow: The six-fold repetition creates rhetorical accumulation. He notes the form-critical parallel in Egyptian texts where a motto opens and closes a reflection unit (cf. the Amenemope frame). Garrett: Defends 'vanity' as the best English rendering but enriches it with the sense of moral-epistemological failure: things fail to deliver on their implicit promises. All three agree: this is not nihilism — the book does not deny the existence of good — but the denial that creaturely goods can provide ultimate *yitron*.

3:11 — Eternity in the Heart

אֵת הָעוֹלָם נָתַן בְּלִבָּם

Seow: His philological treatment is the most thorough. He argues 'olam here denotes 'the entirety of duration' rather than abstract 'eternity,' giving the sense that God has implanted in man a consciousness of temporal totality — an awareness that time extends beyond any individual human experience. This creates the characteristic human frustration: man knows there is more to know than he can know. Fox: Man is given enough awareness of the totality to know that he cannot comprehend the totality — the gap between awareness and comprehension is the book's defining anthropological observation. He cites this as evidence of the 'absurdity' reading: man is designed to desire what he cannot reach. Garrett: Prefers 'eternity' — God has placed an inextinguishable longing for the transcendent within the human heart, which no creaturely experience can satisfy. This is the theological ground of the *carpe diem* passages: since creation cannot fill the God-shaped capacity, receive it as gift rather than grasping it as ultimate.

7:29 — The Anthropological Climax

אִשָּׁר עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים אֵת הָאָדָם יִשָּׁר וְהִמָּה בִקְשׁוֹ חֲשֻבֹנוֹת רַבִּים

Fox: This verse provides the closest thing to an explicit explanation of the human moral condition in the book. יִשָּׁר ('upright') denotes moral-volitional integrity as originally constituted by God. חֲשֻבֹנוֹת רַבִּים ('many devices/schemes') — Fox notes the word חֲשֻבֹנוֹ appears in 7:25,27 in the sense of 'accounting/calculation,' so 'many calculations' may capture the human project of devising alternative moral-accounting systems to replace the original uprightness. Seow: The verse is the closest Qohelet comes to the doctrine of the fall without using that language. He notes the lexical connection to Psalm 99:8 and Numbers 32:23 — חֲשֻבֹנוֹ as moral reckoning. Garrett: This is the OT's most direct statement that the fundamental human problem is not environmental but volitional — man's self-devised schemes have replaced the Creator's design.

12:13–14 — The Theological Climax

סוֹף דְּבַר הַכֹּל גִּשְׁמָע אֵת הָאֱלֹהִים יִרְא וְאֵת מִצְוֹתָיו שְׁמוֹר כִּי זֶה כָּל הָאָדָם

Fox: Even within his frame-narrator reading, Fox acknowledges that 12:13–14 represents the book's definitive resolution — the outer narrator's endorsement of the fear of God as the adequate response to Qohelet's demonstrations of *hevel*. He resists the reading that the epilogue merely 'corrects' Qohelet, seeing it instead as the necessary completion of the investigation. Seow: The phrase כִּי זֶה כָּל הָאָדָם ('for this is the whole of man') is syntactically elliptical; he analyzes several proposals and concludes the KJV's 'whole duty of man' (with supplied 'duty') is the best interpretive translation, though the Hebrew is more radical: this defines what human beings are. Garrett: The eschatological grounding in v. 14 (every hidden thing brought to judgment) is what gives the fear of God its rational warrant — it is not a blind leap but the epistemologically justified response to the certainty of comprehensive divine judgment.

PART III: BOOK OUTLINE

FRAME NARRATIVE (1:1–3; 12:9–14)

1. Superscription: The Solomonic Identification (1:1)
2. The Motto and the Central Yitron Question (1:2–3)
3. Epilogue: Credentials, Authority, and Final Verdict (12:9–14)

PROLOGUE POEM: Relentless Cycles of Creation (1:4–11)

4. Cosmic Cycles: Generations, Sun, Wind, Water (1:4–7)
5. Human Ignorance of and Weariness with the Cycle (1:8–11)

PART ONE: THE ROYAL EXPERIMENT (1:12–2:26)

6. The Royal Investigator: Credentials and Commission (1:12–13)
7. Wisdom's Limits: The First Disappointing Conclusion (1:14–18)
8. The Experiment in Pleasure: Laughter, Wine, Building, Wealth (2:1–11)
9. Wisdom vs. Folly: Genuine Advantage That Death Nullifies (2:12–17)
10. The Problem of Legacy: Leaving Everything to an Unknown Heir (2:18–23)
11. First Carpe Diem: Receiving One's God-Given Portion (2:24–26)

PART TWO: TIMES AND SEASONS (3:1–5:20)

12. The Poem of Times: Divine Appointment of All Human Experience (3:1–8)
13. God's Beautiful Governance and the Gift of Eternity in the Heart (3:9–15)
14. Injustice in the Place of Justice: Theodicy and Divine Judgment (3:16–22)
15. Oppression: The Tears of the Powerless (4:1–3)
16. Toil, Rivalry, Idleness, and the Wisdom of Partnership (4:4–12)
17. The Peril and Fragility of Political Power (4:13–16)
18. Worship, Vows, and the Fear of God (5:1–7)
19. Governmental Injustice, the Land, and Agricultural Economics (5:8–9)
20. The Futility of Wealth: Insatiability, Anxiety, and Loss (5:10–17)
21. Second Carpe Diem: The Beautiful Simplicity of God's Gift (5:18–20)

PART THREE: WISDOM'S LIMITS AND GIFTS (6:1–8:17)

22. Wealth Without Enjoyment: A Greater Evil (6:1–9)
23. Man's Inability to Know What Is Good for Him (6:10–12)
24. Better-Than Proverbs: Sober Wisdom (7:1–14)
25. The Danger of Extremes (7:15–22)
26. The Quest for Wisdom and the Discovery of Universal Folly (7:23–29)
27. Wisdom in the Royal Court (8:1–9)
28. Delayed Retribution and the Theodicy of Faith (8:10–15)
29. The Insurmountable Inscrutability of God's Work (8:16–17)

PART FOUR: HUMAN COMMONALITY AND URGENT LIVING (9:1–11:6)

30. One Fate for All — Death the Great Leveler (9:1–6)
31. Third Great Carpe Diem (9:7–10)
32. Wisdom Superior Yet Unrecognized (9:11–18)
33. Wisdom and Folly Contrasted in Proverbs (10:1–20)

34. Courageous Action Under Uncertainty (11:1–6)

PART FIVE: REMEMBER YOUR CREATOR (11:7–12:8)

35. Youth, Light, Joy, and the Coming Judgment (11:7–10)

36. The Allegory of Old Age and Death (12:1–7)

37. The Hevel Motto Reprised (12:8)

EPILOGUE (12:9–14)

38. The Sage's Credentials (12:9–10)

39. The Authority of Wisdom Words: Goads and Nails from One Shepherd (12:11–12)

40. The Conclusion: Fear God and Keep His Commandments (12:13–14)

PART IV: THEOLOGICAL OUTLINE

VIII. THEOLOGY OF ECCLESIASTES

A. Theology Proper — The God of Ecclesiastes

The God of Ecclesiastes is frequently misread as distant, impersonal, or philosophically abstract. A careful reading reveals a thoroughly biblical portrait:

- **Divine Transcendence (5:2):** God is in heaven (בְּשָׁמַיִם); man is on earth (עַל הָאָרֶץ). The ontological distance is not alienation but the proper Creator-creature distinction. God is not manipulable by human wisdom, wealth, religious performance, or accumulation of good works. He is holy Other.
- **Divine Sovereignty over Time (3:1–15):** God has appointed an 'et for every matter under heaven (3:1). He has made everything beautiful in its appointed time (3:11). His works endure forever — nothing can be added to or subtracted from what He does (3:14). Human beings cannot alter the divine calendar, and the wise person does not attempt to do so.
- **Divine Givenness / Generosity (2:24–26; 3:13; 5:18–20):** All that man has — wisdom, wealth, enjoyment, life itself — is a gift (מִתְּנָה) from a generous Creator. Creation is good and enjoyable as gift received, not as trophy achieved. Even the capacity for enjoyment is itself given by God (5:19).
- **Divine Governance of Justice (3:16–17; 5:8; 8:12–13; 12:14):** God sees the injustice of the court and the oppression of the poor (5:8). There is an appointed time for divine judgment on every matter (3:17). The fear of God is rationally grounded in the certainty of comprehensive eschatological judgment (12:14).
- **Divine Inscrutability (3:11; 8:16–17; 11:5):** No one can comprehend the full work God does from beginning to end (3:11; 8:17). This is not arbitrariness but the necessary consequence of infinite divine wisdom exceeding creaturely comprehension. The proper response is wonder, trust, and reverence — not despair.

B. Anthropology — The Human Condition Under the Sun

- **Image-Bearer Constitutionally Oriented Toward Transcendence (3:11):** Man bears eternity (עוֹלָם) in his heart — a longing for permanence, meaning, and comprehension that creation alone cannot satisfy. He is constitutionally oriented toward God but creaturely in his grasp.
- **Created Upright, Bent by Self-Direction (7:29):** God made man upright (יָשָׁר). Man has sought out many schemes (חֲשִׁבֹנוֹת רַבִּים). This is the OT's most direct statement of the fall's anthropological consequences — not Qohelet's personal pessimism but his observed diagnosis of universal human self-corruption.
- **The Universality of Death (2:14–16; 3:19–20; 9:2–3):** One fate (מִקְרָה, 'event/lot') comes to all — wise and fool, righteous and wicked, man and beast. Death is the great leveler that exposes the futility of achievement-based identity and drives the wise person toward eschatological hope.
- **Structural Insatiability (1:7–8; 4:8; 5:10–11; 6:7):** The eye is not satisfied with seeing; the ear is not filled with hearing; the lover of silver is not satisfied with silver; appetite is not filled. Human desire is structurally insatiable when aimed at creaturely goods — because it was designed for God.
- **The Folly of the Autonomous Self (1:12–2:23; 7:23–29):** Ecclesiastes is the OT's most sustained critique of the project of constructing meaning and identity apart from God. Every autonomous experiment — wisdom, pleasure, work, wealth, legacy — is interrogated and found hevel.

C. Soteriology / Covenant — Fear of God as the Resolution

- **Fear of God as Climactic Resolution (5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13; 12:13):** The book does not offer intellectual solutions to hevel but a covenantal posture: reverence before the Creator-Judge. This is not the beginning of wisdom (as in Prov 1:7 — that is the starting point) but the culminating integrating virtue — wisdom arrived at through the full circuit of honest investigation.
- **Enjoyment as Covenantal Reception (2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10):** The carpe diem passages call for receiving creaturely goods from the hand of God — a posture of gratitude rather than grasping. This is explicitly impossible apart from divine grace: 'who can eat or who can have enjoyment without him?' (2:25). The one who fears God receives the gift; the sinner receives only toil.

Ecclesiastes Syllabus

- **Wisdom and Torah Together (12:13):** The epilogue's call to keep God's commandments (מִצְוֹתָיו שְׁמֹר) integrates Ecclesiastes into the full Torah framework. Wisdom literature and covenant law are not competing authorities — they are complementary expressions of the single covenant relationship with the one God.

D. Eschatology — Judgment and Hope

- **Comprehensive Future Judgment (3:17; 12:14):** God will bring every work into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil. This eschatological anchor transforms the entire book: hevel is not the final word. The injustice observed throughout is not permanent — it awaits a comprehensive divine reckoning.
- **The Return of the Spirit to God (12:7):** The spirit returns to God who gave it — implying personal continuity beyond physical death. Ecclesiastes does not develop a full resurrection theology (that awaits progressive revelation in Dan 12; the Gospels), but it provides the anthropological foundation: the human person is not reducible to the dust to which the body returns.
- **Christological Trajectory (followed by Akin and Keller):** The book raises questions that it cannot fully answer from within the OT canon and that only Christ fully answers: Who can enjoy creaturely goods without guilt? (2:25 — the answer is the one whose guilt has been borne by another.) Who faces death without despair? (9:10 — only the one for whom death has been conquered.) Who is the Wisdom that transcends all human hevel? (1 Cor 1:30 — Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God.)

IX. MAJOR THEMES

1. Hevel — The Transience and Inscrutability of Life

The signature theme, announced at the outset and reprised at the close: life as a creaturely project pursued apart from God is as ungovernable and unsatisfying as breath. The sage does not wallow in this observation but uses it diagnostically — as the accurate reading of experience that drives the honest person toward the one stable ground. Every chapter circles back to hevel as the diagnostic lens through which human experience is evaluated.

2. Toil and Its Discontents

Human labor is simultaneously dignifying (God commands it in Gen 2:15; 3:17–19) and frustrating (its fruits are uncertain, its products mortal, its legacy uncontrollable). Ecclesiastes holds both realities without collapsing either: work is genuinely good when received as vocation and pursued with wisdom, but identity and meaning must not be grounded in it. The person who makes work their salvation will eventually face the reckoning of 2:18–23.

3. The Theology of Creaturely Enjoyment

The *carpe diem* passages constitute one of the OT's most sophisticated defenses of creaturely enjoyment. Contra asceticism, the book affirms food, drink, marriage, work, and friendship as genuine gifts of a generous Creator. Contra hedonism, it refuses to make these the basis of meaning or identity. The key theological move is from earning to receiving: the same meal that is hevel when grasped as the product of self-achievement becomes wisdom when received with gratitude as the gift of God.

4. Wisdom's Real but Relative Value

Wisdom is genuinely, substantially superior to folly — as light exceeds darkness (2:13). It navigates life better (8:1,5), speaks more effectively (9:17; 10:12), works more efficiently (10:10), and sees further ahead (2:14a). But it cannot secure meaning, prevent death, guarantee justice, or provide *yitron* on its own. Wisdom finds its proper home and full value only when grounded in the fear of God (12:13).

5. Injustice and the Sovereignty of God

The social conscience of Ecclesiastes is often overlooked. Chapters 3–5 confront systemic injustice (the oppression of the poor, the perversion of justice, the exploitation of the weak) with unflinching honesty. The sage neither excuses injustice (5:8 calls it evil) nor despairs of it: God sees (5:8) and has appointed a time for judgment (3:17). This framework enables the covenant person to witness and protest injustice without being consumed by cynicism or despair.

6. Death as the Unavoidable Compass

No wisdom book returns to death more consistently than Ecclesiastes. Death is the teacher who punctures every human pretension (7:2), the leveler who exposes the limits of wisdom (2:14–16), the boundary that gives urgency to present living (9:7–10; 12:1), and the horizon that makes the fear of God not merely prudent but existentially necessary. The sage's recurring *memento mori* is not morbid obsession but wisdom's most effective pedagogical tool.

7. The Fear of God as the Integrating Virtue

The structural and theological resolution of the book: the fear of God is not one duty among many but the orientation that properly integrates all of life — work, enjoyment, relationships, justice, worship, speech, aging, and death. This is the answer to every question the book raises. It is not an easy or automatic answer — it requires the whole circuit of honest investigation to earn its authority — but it is the only answer that holds.

X. BIBLICAL COUNSELING THEMES

Ecclesiastes is among the richest OT resources for biblical counseling because it does what counseling requires: it engages the actual experience of human life — including its darkness, confusion, injustice, and grief — with unflinching honesty before bringing the Word to bear on it. The following themes map directly to common presenting problems in pastoral counseling.

A. Idolatry of Achievement and the Autonomous Self

Ecclesiastes 1–2 provides the OT's most comprehensive analysis of the human heart's attempt to construct identity, worth, and meaning through achievement. Solomon's royal experiment — wisdom, building, pleasure, wealth — is the most extreme version of the project most counselees are running at a smaller scale. The diagnostic question for the counselor is not primarily 'Did you sin?' but 'What were you trusting for ultimate satisfaction?' Every form of burnout, drivenness, compulsive overwork, or identity collapse under failure has a beneath-the-behavior idolatry that Ecclesiastes helps name. The specific idols most commonly encountered: productivity (2:4–9), intellectual mastery (1:16–18), legacy (2:18–21), pleasure (2:1–11), and financial security (5:10–17).

B. Anxiety, Control, and the Sovereignty of God over Times

The time-poem (3:1–15) and the inscrutability passages (8:16–17; 11:1–6) directly address the anxiety that arises from the illusion of control. The counselee who catastrophizes, over-plans, manipulates relationships, or cannot sleep (5:12) is functionally asserting that they must — and can — override God's sovereign appointment of times. Ecclesiastes does not counsel passivity: 11:1–6 explicitly calls for courageous action under uncertainty. But it calls for action held in open hands, pursued without demanding guaranteed outcomes. Key counseling move: help the counselee name the specific 'time' they are trying to control, and locate it within God's sovereign schedule rather than their anxiety's catastrophic projection.

C. Grief, Loss, and Death Anxiety

Ecclesiastes 9:1–6 and 12:1–7 provide the OT's most sustained engagement with mortality. For counselees processing terminal diagnosis, the death of a loved one, anticipatory grief, or existential fear of death, the sage offers the following framework: death is real and not minimized (9:5 — 'the dead know nothing'); it is unjust in the fallen world (9:3 — 'one fate comes to all'); it is subject to divine judgment and therefore not the final word (3:17; 12:14); and its certainty makes present faithful living not tragic but urgent and meaningful (9:7–10; 12:1). The counselor must not rush to comfort before sitting with the honest weight of 9:2–3.

D. Disillusionment and Cynicism

Counselees who have experienced the bankruptcy of ambition, the emptiness of achieved goals, or the catastrophic collapse of expectations may arrive in a hevel-moment — having proven Qohelet's thesis experientially. The temptation for both counselee and counselor is to rush to resolution. Ecclesiastes models a different approach: it sits in the hevel diagnosis through twelve chapters, rigorously and honestly, before the resolution of 12:13. The counselor's role is to validate the accurate diagnosis (the world is genuinely hevel — you are not wrong about that) while steadily directing toward the one stable ground. Premature comfort is not comfort — it is the dishonesty that sends the counselee back into the experiment.

E. Work, Identity, and Drivenness

The solitary workaholic of 4:7–8 — 'there is one alone, and there is not a second... yet there is no end of all his labor, neither is his eye satisfied with riches' — is a precise clinical portrait of the achievement-idolater. Chapters 2:18–23 and 4:4–8 expose the under-the-behavior beliefs driving compulsive work: 'My work is my worth,' 'I must produce to justify my existence,' 'More achievement will finally satisfy.' The counseling movement: (1) surface the functional belief through careful Socratic questioning; (2) demonstrate its hevel-character from Ecclesiastes' own demonstration; (3) reconstruct identity in the fear of God — which produces work received as vocation rather than grasped as salvation.

F. Relational Wisdom — Friendship and Marriage

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 provides the most compact wisdom case for covenant friendship and partnership in the OT. The three specific advantages of the partnership — mutual aid in falling (v. 10), warmth in vulnerability (v. 11), and strength against opposition (v. 12) — map directly to what covenant community is designed to provide. The three-cord proverb (4:12) is widely and appropriately applied to marriage with God as the third strand. The direct commendation of marital enjoyment in 9:9 ('live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest') counsels an orientation toward the marriage relationship as gift received and enjoyed rather than transaction negotiated and evaluated. Counseling application: help couples move from 'what am I getting?' to 'what has God given us?'

G. Self-Pity, Injustice, and the Complaint of the Wronged

The observations of injustice in Ecclesiastes (3:16; 4:1; 5:8; 8:10–14) are not excuses for chronic grievance but honest appraisals that are then submitted to divine sovereignty and future judgment. Counselees in the grip of self-pity over genuine injustice need the Ecclesiastes framework held together: Yes, what happened to you is genuinely evil (not minimized — 4:1 calls it 'evil'); yes, God sees it (5:8); yes, there is an appointed time of judgment (3:17; 12:14); and yes, the required response now is purposeful living in the present rather than paralysis in the wound. The counselor must validate the injustice without feeding the self-pity, and present the eschatological justice without minimizing the present pain.

H. The Theology of Suffering and God's Mysterious Providence

8:16–17 is the pastoral key for counselees demanding an explanation for their suffering or for God's seemingly arbitrary governance: 'Though a wise man thinks to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.' Ecclesiastes does not explain suffering — it does not offer the theodicy of Job's friends or the simple retribution principle. Instead, it situates suffering within God's inscrutable but unquestioned governance (3:14; 8:17; 11:5) and anchors the sufferer in the character of God revealed in His transcendence and coming judgment. The counselor's temptation to over-explain ('here's why God allowed this') must be resisted. The appropriate response: 'I don't fully know why — and neither will the wisest person — but I know who is governing it, and I know it will face a comprehensive judgment.'

CHAPTER 1

Chapter Summary — Solomon introduces himself as Qohelet, announces the hevel motto, and uses cosmic observation — cycling generations, the sun's circuit, the wind's restless circuits, rivers running to an ever-empty sea — to demonstrate creation's relentless, unresolved cycling. Nothing is new; nothing is remembered. The prologue establishes the problem: creaturely existence considered apart from God offers no lasting profit. The royal investigation of all things done under heaven then formally begins.

CHAPTER 2

Chapter Summary — Solomon systematically tests pleasure (laughter, wine), great works (houses, vineyards, gardens, parks, pools), human resources (servants, herds), wealth (silver, gold, music), and wisdom versus folly. Each experiment yields hevel. The climactic discovery: he must leave his life's accumulated work to an unknown heir who may be a fool (2:19 — fulfilled in Rehoboam, 1 Ki 12). The chapter closes with the first carpe diem: receiving food, drink, and the good of one's labor as a gift from God's hand is the one thing that yields genuine satisfaction — and even this capacity for reception is itself God's gift (2:25).

CHAPTER 3

Chapter Summary — The celebrated poem of appointed times (3:1–8) demonstrates God's absolute sovereignty over the full spectrum of human experience. Every pair — birth/death, weeping/laughing, war/peace — falls within God's ordained appointment. Verse 11 is the theological heart: God has made everything beautiful in its time and placed eternity in man's heart, yet man cannot comprehend God's full work. The chapter confronts injustice (3:16) and anchors the response in divine judgment (3:17) and present enjoyment of one's appointed portion (3:22).

CHAPTER 4

Chapter Summary — The social dimensions of hevel come into focus. Solomon observes oppression with its uncomforted victims (4:1–3), competitive toil driven by envy (4:4–6), compulsive solitary work without purpose or companion (4:7–8), and the wisdom of covenant partnership (4:9–12). The chapter closes with the fragility of political popularity (4:13–16). The cumulative theme: human social structures are as subject to hevel as individual ambitions. The antidote to competitive isolation is covenant partnership held together by a third cord.

CHAPTER 5

Chapter Summary — Chapter 5 moves from politics to worship (5:1–7), governmental economics (5:8–9), wealth (5:10–17), and climaxes in the most theologically developed carpe diem of the book (5:18–20). The worship section is the book's most direct and practically important: the fear of God expressed in careful listening and kept vows is the corrective to the autonomous self. The wealth section diagnoses the insatiability of financial desire and contrasts the laborer's sweet sleep with the rich man's anxious wakefulness.

CHAPTER 6

Chapter Summary — Chapter 6 opens the book's second half with the darkest 'better than' statement: a man may have everything — riches, wealth, honor, a hundred children, long life — yet if he cannot enjoy it, a stillborn is better off (6:3). The capacity for enjoyment, when withheld by God, makes comprehensive material blessing worse than nothing. The chapter probes the structural insatiability of appetite (6:7) and closes with the great inscrutability question: no one knows what is good for man in life (6:12).

CHAPTER 7

Chapter Summary — A dense collection of 'better than' proverbs (7:1–14) counsels sober wisdom: the house of mourning over feasting, the end of a thing over its beginning, patience over pride. Verses 15–22 confront theodicy honestly — the righteous perish and the wicked prolong life — before resolving in the fear of God (7:18). The chapter closes with the devastating anthropological conclusion: God made man upright, but humanity has sought out many schemes (7:29), the OT's most concentrated statement of the fall's ongoing moral consequences.

CHAPTER 8

Chapter Summary — The wise man knows how to interpret a matter and navigate royal authority (8:1–9). The chapter confronts delayed justice directly (8:10–14): the wicked receive honorable burials while the righteous are forgotten; evil-doers are emboldened by the absence of swift judgment. Yet the sage affirms by covenantal faith: it will go well with those who fear God (8:12–13). The chapter closes on complete divine inscrutability — no one, however diligent or wise, can fully comprehend what God is doing (8:16–17).

CHAPTER 9

Chapter Summary — One fate — death — comes to all, righteous and wicked alike (9:1–6). The sage does not resolve this theoretically but responds practically with the book's most urgent *carpe diem* (9:7–10): eat with joy, drink with a merry heart, enjoy life with the wife you love, do with all your might whatever your hand finds — for Sheol has no work, no device, no knowledge, no wisdom. The chapter observes wisdom's great irony: it is genuinely superior (9:16–18) but systematically unrecognized and unrewarded by the social order (9:11–15).

CHAPTER 10

Chapter Summary — A sustained proverb collection addressing wisdom and folly in practical life: the dead-flies-in-ointment proverb illustrating how small folly disproportionately contaminates great wisdom (10:1), the wise/foolish heart's directional tendency (10:2), the fool's self-disclosure (10:3), political service wisdom (10:4–7), physical labor caution (10:8–11), the self-destructive character of foolish speech (10:12–15), leadership quality (10:16–17), laziness and speech caution (10:18–20). The chapter models the practical wisdom the fear of God generates in ordinary social life.

CHAPTER 11

Chapter Summary — The final practical wisdom section before the closing allegory. Generous action under uncertainty (11:1–2), the certainty of natural processes vs. human ignorance (11:3), the warning against paralytic over-caution (11:4), the incomprehensibility of divine creative work (11:5), and sustained faithful effort (11:6) together constitute the book's most direct counsel for courageous living despite uncertainty. Verses 7–10 address youth directly: light is sweet, life is good, joy is right — but judgment is coming. Live fully in both realities simultaneously.

CHAPTER 12

Chapter Summary — The book's climax in three movements: the extended allegory of aging and death (12:1–7), the hevel motto reprised (12:8), and the epilogue (12:9–14). The allegory — the most sustained poetic description of mortality in all of Scripture — argues for remembering the Creator while the full capacity for worship and response still exists. Every image points to the irreversible diminishment of old age and the finality of death: dust returns to earth, spirit returns to God. The epilogue commends the sage's method and credentials, establishes the authority of wisdom words as goads and nails from one Shepherd, and delivers the book's irreducible conclusion: fear God, keep His commandments — this is the whole of man — for God will bring every work and every hidden thing into comprehensive judgment.

Christ in Ecclesiastes

I. The Empty Search for Profit — Ecclesiastes 1:2–3

Ecclesiastes 1:2–3 (KJV): “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?”

הָבֵל הָבָלִים (*havel havalim*) — ‘vapor of vapors’; a superlative construction (like ‘Holy of Holies’) intensifying breath-like insubstantiality, not moral wickedness

יֵטְרוֹן (*yitron*) — surplus, net gain, that which remains after the labor is weighed — used almost exclusively in Ecclesiastes; the book’s central economic metaphor

Exegetical Note

Qoheleth opens by asking whether any labor ‘under the sun’ yields a durable yitron. The verdict of the whole book is negative: no yitron exists within the closed system of a fallen, cursed creation. The phrase ‘under the sun’ (תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, *tachath hashamesh*) occurs twenty-nine times and marks the deliberate horizon of the book’s investigation: everything visible, temporal, and circumscribed by the created order east of Eden.

Christological Fulfillment

Christ is the yitron that Qoheleth could not find under the sun, because He is not of the sun’s system at all — He is the Lord from heaven (1 Corinthians 15:47). Paul, having counted every earthly credential as loss, describes knowing Christ as surpassing ‘excellency’ or gain (Philippians 3:7–8), using the very economic language of profit and loss that structures Ecclesiastes. Where Qoheleth’s ledger under the sun always closes at zero, Paul’s ledger in Christ closes in infinite surplus. Colossians 2:3 answers the Preacher directly: in Christ ‘are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ — the very treasure Qoheleth spent a lifetime seeking and could not keep.

II. Nothing New Under the Sun — Ecclesiastes 1:9–10

Ecclesiastes 1:9–10 (KJV): “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.”

Exegetical Note

The cyclical language of verses 4–8 (generations, sun, wind, rivers) establishes a closed, repeating cosmos. Nothing under the sun escapes the circle. The Preacher is not denying technological or historical novelty in a trivial sense; he is denying any qualitatively new order of existence arising from within the present fallen creation.

Christological Fulfillment

The New Testament announces precisely what Ecclesiastes says cannot occur under the sun: a genuinely new thing breaking in from above it. ‘If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new’ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christ inaugurates a kingdom and a creation-order that does not merely repeat the old cycle but breaks it, culminating in the promise, ‘Behold, I make all things new’ (Revelation 21:5). The resurrection of Christ is the one genuinely new event in history, the ‘firstfruits’ (1 Corinthians 15:20) of a new order that the closed circle ‘under the sun’ could never produce from within itself.

III. Eating, Drinking, and Rest as the Gift of God — Ecclesiastes 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:18–20

Ecclesiastes 2:24 (KJV): “*There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.*”

עָמַל (amal) — toil, labor, the wearisome exertion that characterizes work under the curse (cf. Genesis 3:17, 19)

Exegetical Note

Four times Qoheleth commends simple enjoyment of food, drink, and labor as a gift (מַתָּת, mattath) from the hand of God (2:24; 3:13; 5:18–19; 9:7). This is not hedonism but a modest, God-given contentment set against the futile grasping after yitron. Yet even this gift is provisional — it does not remove עָמַל (amal, toil) itself; it only sweetens it. The curse remains operative even in the enjoyment.

Christological Fulfillment

Christ offers what Qoheleth's provisional gift only foreshadows: true rest from the labor itself. 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest... for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:28, 30). The writer to the Hebrews explicitly frames this as the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God, superior to any rest available under the sun (Hebrews 4:9–10). At Cana, Christ turns water into wine at a wedding feast, the first of His signs (John 2:1–11), and at the Last Supper institutes bread and wine as abiding tokens of a covenant meal that anticipates the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9) — the eating and drinking of Ecclesiastes 2:24, eschatologically fulfilled and freed from amal forever.

IV. A Time for Every Purpose — Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, 11

Ecclesiastes 3:1 (KJV): “*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:*”

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (KJV): “*He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.*”

עֵת (et) — an appointed time, a divinely fixed occasion — not merely chronological duration (זֶמַן) but the right, ordained moment

עוֹלָם (olam) — eternity, perpetuity, the age; here 'the world' set in man's heart — an innate sense of the eternal that finite, time-bound man cannot comprehend or master

Exegetical Note

The fourteen antithetical pairs of 3:2–8 catalogue the fixed, divinely appointed ‘times’ (עֵתִים, ittim) that govern every human experience. Verse 11 is the theological hinge: God has placed עוֹלָם (olam) — eternity itself — in the human heart, so that man is constitutionally unable to be satisfied by anything merely temporal, yet is also unable, from within time, to trace out God's eternal work from beginning to end.

Christological Fulfillment

Galatians 4:4 answers Ecclesiastes 3 directly, in its very idiom of appointed time: 'when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law.' Christ's incarnation is the et, the appointed time, in which God acted decisively within the very cycle of times and seasons that Ecclesiastes catalogues, without being confined by it. And because eternity (olam) is set in the heart, only the eternal Son can satisfy it: He is the one in whom 'were all things created... and by him all things consist' (Colossians 1:16–17), the Alpha and Omega who is 'the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever' (Hebrews 13:8). What Qoheleth could not find out 'from the beginning to the end,' the New Testament reveals has been made known in Christ, in whom God 'purposed in himself' the mystery of His will 'before the foundation of the world' (Ephesians 1:4, 9).

V. The Oppressed with No Comforter — Ecclesiastes 4:1

Ecclesiastes 4:1 (KJV): “*So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.*”

מְנַחֵם (*menachem*) — one who comforts; the active participle of נָחַם (*nacham*), doubled in the verse for emphasis — they lacked a comforter, they lacked a comforter

Exegetical Note

The double repetition, ‘they had no comforter... but they had no comforter,’ is unusual and deliberate, underscoring the total absence of any *menachem* for the oppressed under the sun. This is one of the darkest verses in the book, verging on the despair of 4:2–3, which judges the dead and the unborn more fortunate than the living oppressed.

Christological Fulfillment

Isaiah, using the same root, promises ‘Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God’ (Isaiah 40:1), a comfort that arrives in the Servant who is ‘despised and rejected of men’ and who bears the very griefs and oppression Qoheleth describes (Isaiah 53:3–4). Christ announces His own ministry in these terms in the synagogue at Nazareth, applying Isaiah 61 — sent ‘to comfort all that mourn’ — to Himself (Luke 4:18–21). And at His departure He promises another Comforter, the Paraclete, so that the oppressed of Ecclesiastes 4:1 are never again left without one: ‘I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever’ (John 14:16).

VI. Keep Thy Foot: The Need for a True Mediator — Ecclesiastes 5:1–2

Ecclesiastes 5:1–2 (KJV): “*Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.*”

Exegetical Note

Qoheleth’s counsel presumes an unbridgeable distance: ‘God is in heaven, and thou upon earth.’ Right worship requires careful, fearful approach precisely because there is no mediator to close that gap — only caution, restraint, and few words stand between the worshiper and rash sin in God’s presence.

Christological Fulfillment

Hebrews takes up this very anxiety about drawing near to God and resolves it in Christ’s priesthood: believers may ‘come boldly unto the throne of grace’ (Hebrews 4:16) and have ‘boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith’ (Hebrews 10:19, 22). The distance Qoheleth warns of — heaven above, earth beneath — is spanned by the One who ‘is the mediator of a better covenant’ (Hebrews 8:6). Christ Himself, as the true and better temple, tells the Samaritan woman that the hour has come when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth (John 4:23–24), fulfilling rather than abolishing the carefulness Qoheleth demanded at the house of God.

VII. No Just Man — Ecclesiastes 7:20, 29

Ecclesiastes 7:20 (KJV): “*For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.*”

Ecclesiastes 7:29 (KJV): “*Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.*”

יָשָׁר (*yashar*) — upright, straight; the original moral condition in which God made man

חֲשִׁיבֹנוֹת (*chishevonoth*) — devices, inventions, schemes; from חָשַׁב (*chashav*, to devise/reckon) — man's contrived departures from the original uprightness

Exegetical Note

Ecclesiastes 7:20 is Qoheleth's flattest statement of universal depravity: no just man exists anywhere on earth. Verse 29 supplies the etiology — God made man yashar (upright), but man has actively sought out chishevonoth, contrived inventions, i.e., the Fall was man's own doing, not God's.

Christological Fulfillment

Paul quotes this verdict nearly verbatim in Romans 3:10–12 ('there is none righteous, no, not one... there is none that doeth good, no, not one') as the foundation for the gospel's necessity. The remedy is not found in man producing his own uprightness but in God 'made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him' (2 Corinthians 5:21). Where the first man, made upright, sought out his own inventions and fell, the last Adam is obedient where Adam was not, so that 'as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous' (Romans 5:19). Christ is the one just Man Qoheleth could not find upon the earth.

VIII. Wisdom That Makes the Face Shine — Ecclesiastes 8:1

Ecclesiastes 8:1 (KJV): *"Who is as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing? a man's wisdom maketh his face to shine, and the boldness of his face shall be changed."*

Exegetical Note

The rhetorical question 'Who is as the wise man?' expects the answer 'no one' — true, ultimate wisdom is not found among the sons of men Qoheleth has examined. The verse links wisdom with a shining, transformed countenance, recalling Moses' veiled, fading glory after Sinai (Exodus 34:29–35).

Christological Fulfillment

Paul explicitly answers Qoheleth's question: Christ is 'made unto us wisdom' (1 Corinthians 1:30), in whom 'are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:3), and 'a greater than Solomon is here' (Matthew 12:42). Where Moses' shining face faded and had to be veiled, 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God' shines unfading 'in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6), and believers beholding that glory are themselves 'changed into the same image from glory to glory' (2 Corinthians 3:18) — the very transformation of countenance Ecclesiastes 8:1 describes, made permanent rather than fading.

IX. Time and Chance — Ecclesiastes 9:4, 11–12

Ecclesiastes 9:11 (KJV): *"I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all."*

Ecclesiastes 9:4 (KJV): *"For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion."*

פֶּגַע (*pega*) — chance occurrence, unforeseen event — not impersonal fatalism, but the inscrutability of providence from the limited vantage of the man under the sun

Exegetical Note

Human skill and strength do not guarantee outcomes; an inscrutable pega ('time and chance') overtakes even the swift and the strong. Set beside this is 9:4–5, in which mere biological life, however diminished ('a living dog'), is prized above the most glorious death ('a dead lion'), because Qoheleth's horizon under the sun offers no resurrection hope — only the finality of Sheol.

Christological Fulfillment

What appears as impersonal 'chance' to the man under the sun is, in fact, governed by a sovereign Lord who has 'put in his own power' the times and the seasons (Acts 1:7), and who 'changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings' (Daniel

2:21). More decisively, Christ overturns the calculus of 9:4: it is no longer merely better to be a living dog than a dead lion, for 'Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more' (Romans 6:9), and 'if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him' (Romans 6:8). Because 'now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept' (1 Corinthians 15:20), a dead saint in Christ is better off than any living man under the sun (Philippians 1:21, 23) — the exact inversion of Qoheleth's despairing arithmetic, resolved only on the far side of the resurrection.

X. Remember Thy Creator — Ecclesiastes 12:1–7

Ecclesiastes 12:1 (KJV): *“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;”*

Ecclesiastes 12:7 (KJV): *“Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”*

בֹּרְאֵיךָ (*bor'echa*) — ‘thy Creator(s)’ — the participle of בָּרָא (*bara*), pointed as a plural form with singular referent, an intensive/majestic plural paralleling אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*) — the one Creator God, spoken of with the fulness proper to His majesty

Exegetical Note

The extended poem of decline in old age (12:1–6) climaxes in death itself: the body (dust) returns to the earth from which it was formed (Genesis 2:7; 3:19), while the spirit (רוּחַ, *ruach*) returns to God who gave it. Ecclesiastes offers no resurrection of the body here — only the barest continuance of the spirit before God, and the command to remember the Creator before the evil days of decline and death arrive.

Christological Fulfillment

The plural intensive *bor'echa*, 'thy Creators,' bears fruit in the New Testament's identification of the Son as the Agent of creation: 'All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made' (John 1:3), and 'by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth' (Colossians 1:16). The One to be remembered in the days of youth is Christ Himself, the Creator who entered the very frailty and decline He created man to experience, and who alone 'hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' (2 Timothy 1:10). Where Ecclesiastes 12:7 leaves the dust in the ground and only the spirit returning to God, 1 Corinthians 15:42–44 promises that the very dust itself, 'sown in corruption,' will be 'raised in incorruption' — the bodily resurrection that answers and completes Qoheleth's unfinished picture of death.

XI. Given From One Shepherd — Ecclesiastes 12:9–11

Ecclesiastes 12:11 (KJV): *“The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd.”*

רֹעֵה עֶחָד (*ro'eh echad*) — ‘one shepherd’ — the ultimate source and authority behind the words of every true wise man, including Qoheleth's own; singular, unifying the whole of canonical wisdom under one Author

Exegetical Note

Having catalogued Qoheleth's own labor as a wise teacher (12:9–10), the epilogist traces the authority of all such wisdom-words back to *ro'eh echad*, 'one shepherd.' The image is striking within Ecclesiastes precisely because the book has been a record of one man's search; here, at its close, that search is subordinated to a single divine Shepherd who stands behind and authorizes it.

Christological Fulfillment

The shepherd motif runs from Ezekiel's promise of 'one shepherd' over God's scattered flock (Ezekiel 34:23; 37:24) through Zechariah's smitten shepherd (Zechariah 13:7, quoted by Christ of Himself in Matthew 26:31) to its fulfillment in Christ's own claim: 'I am the good shepherd... and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd' (John 10:11, 16). Hebrews closes its epistle by naming Christ 'that great shepherd of the sheep' (Hebrews 13:20), and Peter calls Him 'the chief Shepherd' (1 Peter 5:4). The *ro'eh echad* behind every word of true wisdom — including the hard-won, goad-like words of Ecclesiastes itself — is the same Shepherd who is Himself 'the wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1:24).

XII. The Whole Duty of Man and the Coming Judgment — Ecclesiastes 12:13–14

Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 (KJV): *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”*

Exegetical Note

The book's final word is law and eschatology: fear God, keep His commandments, and know that a comprehensive future judgment awaits every deed, including every secret thing. Given 7:20 ('there is not a just man upon earth'), this conclusion is a summons no fallen man under the sun can meet in his own strength — the book ends by exposing, not relieving, man's need.

Christological Fulfillment

Christ answers this closing summons in two ways. First, as the obedient Son He alone fulfills 'the whole duty of man,' having come 'not to destroy, but to fulfil' the law (Matthew 5:17), rendering perfect obedience which is then reckoned to those who trust Him (Romans 5:19; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Second, He is Himself the Judge before whom every work and every secret thing must be brought: 'the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son' (John 5:22), for 'he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained' (Acts 17:31), and 'we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ' (2 Corinthians 5:10). Ecclesiastes closes by pointing to a coming Judge and an impossible standard; the gospel answers with the same Person filling both roles — the righteous Judge who is also the sinner's righteousness.

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