

# Qohelet as Wisdom

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

Emptiness, emptiness, says the Speaker, emptiness, all is empty. What does man gain from all his labour and his toil here under the sun? Generations come and generations go, while the earth endures for ever...

I, the Speaker, ruled as king over Israel in Jerusalem; and in wisdom I applied my mind to study and explore all that is done under heaven...[to] understand wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly, and I came to see that this too is chasing the wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and the more a man knows, the more he has to suffer.

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I said to myself, “Come, I will plunge into pleasures and enjoy myself”; but this too was emptiness. Of laughter I said, “It is madness!” And of pleasure, “What is the good of that?” So I sought to stimulate myself with wine...

I undertook great works; I built myself houses and planted vineyards; I made myself gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit-trees in them; I made myself pools of water to irrigate a grove of growing trees; I bought slaves, male and female,

and I had my home-born slaves as well; I had possessions, more cattle and flocks than any of my predecessors in Jerusalem; I amassed silver and gold also, the treasure of kings and provinces; I acquired singers, men and women, and all that man delights in...Then I turned and reviewed all my handiwork, all my labour and toil, and I saw that everything was emptiness and chasing the wind, of no profit under the sun.

I set myself to look at wisdom and at madness and folly. Then I perceived that wisdom is more profitable than folly, as light is more profitable than darkness: the wise man has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in the dark. Yet I saw also that one and the same fate overtakes them both. So I said to myself, "I too shall suffer the fate of the fool. To what purpose have I been wise? What is the profit of it? Even this", I said to myself, "is emptiness. The wise man is remembered no longer than the fool, for, as the passing days multiply, all will be forgotten. Alas, wise man and fool die the same death!"

...There is nothing better for a man to do than to eat and drink and enjoy himself in return for his labors.

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Whatever is has been already, *whatever has been already is*, and whatever is to come has been already, and God summons each event back in its turn.

Moreover I saw here under the sun that, where justice ought to be, there was wickedness, and where righteousness ought to be, there was wickedness. I said to myself, "God will judge the just man and the wicked equally; every activity and every purpose has its proper time." I said to myself, "In dealing with men it is God's purpose to test them and to see what they truly are. For man is a creature of chance and the beasts are creatures of chance, and one mischance awaits them all: death comes to both alike. They all draw the same breath. Men have no advantage over beasts; for everything is emptiness. All go to the same place: all came from the dust, and to the dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward or whether the spirit of the beast goes downward to the earth?" So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, since that is his lot. For who can bring him through to see what will happen next?

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The man who loves money can never have enough, and the man who is in love with great wealth enjoys no return from it. This too is emptiness. When riches multiply, so do those who live off them; and what advantage has the owner, except to look at them? Sweet is the sleep of the laborer whether he eats little or much; but the rich man owns too much and cannot sleep. There is a

singular evil here under the sun which I have seen: a man hoards wealth to his own hurt, and then that wealth is lost through an unlucky venture, and the owner's son left with nothing. As he came from the womb of mother earth, so must he return, naked as he came; all his toil produces nothing which he can take away with him.

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What advantage then in facing life has the wise man over the fool, or the poor man for all his experience? It is better to be satisfied with what is before your eyes than give rein to desire; this too is emptiness and chasing the wind...For who can know what is good for a man in this life, this brief span of empty existence through which he passes like a shadow?

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Go to it then, eat your food and enjoy it, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for already God has accepted what you have done...Whatever task lies to your hand, do it with all your might; because in Sheol, for which you are bound, there is neither doing nor thinking, neither understanding nor wisdom. One more thing I have observed here under the sun: speed does not win the race nor strength the battle. Bread does not belong to the wise, nor wealth to the intelligent, nor success to the skillful; time and chance govern all.

*Excerpts from throughout Ecclesiastes.  
Translation from the New English Bible.*