Ecclesiastes

1

Summary: *The book opens with a superscription identifying Qohelet ('the Assembler') as a son of David and king in Jerusalem. What follows is the thesis statement of the entire work: hevel havalim — 'vapor of vapors' — everything is vapor. Qohelet then launches into a poem on the wearying cycles of nature (sun, wind, streams) to argue that nothing under the sun is genuinely new. The chapter closes with Qohelet's autobiographical introduction: he applied his mind to investigate everything done under heaven and found it all to be a chasing after wind.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The word hevel appears five times in verse 2 alone and will appear thirty-eight times across the book. Its traditional rendering as 'vanity' (KJV) or 'meaningless' (NIV) has profoundly shaped Western readings of Ecclesiastes as a work of nihilism or despair. But hevel literally means 'breath' or 'vapor' — something that exists, that you can see on a cold morning, but that you cannot hold or keep. It is not 'nothing' but 'nothing lasting.' This distinction matters enormously. Qohelet is not saying life is pointless; he is saying life is transient, elusive, and impossible to grip. The Covenant Rendering uses 'vapor' throughout to preserve this concrete, physical image. The nature poem in verses 4-7 is not decorative but argumentative: the sun rises and sets, the wind circles, the rivers flow to the sea — and nothing changes. The world is a closed loop. This is Qohelet's evidence for his thesis.*

Translation Friction: *The superscription's claim that Qohelet is 'son of David, king in Jerusalem' has traditionally been read as identifying Solomon, but the book's late Hebrew vocabulary, Aramaic loan-words, and Persian-period syntax make Solomonic authorship impossible on linguistic grounds. The Solomonic fiction is a literary device: who better to test whether wisdom, wealth, and achievement can provide lasting satisfaction than the king who had all three? Qohelet is a persona, not a historical claim. The word qohelet itself is a feminine participle from qahal ('to assemble'), used as a title rather than a name — something like 'the one who convenes the assembly' or simply 'the Assembler.'*

Connections: *Qohelet's investigation of wisdom echoes Proverbs 1:1-7 but reaches radically different conclusions — where Proverbs promises that wisdom yields life, Qohelet finds that wisdom yields grief (v. 18). The nature poem shares imagery with Psalm 19:4-6 (the sun's circuit) but strips it of all praise. The phrase 'under the sun' (tachat ha-shemesh) appears twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes and nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible — it is Qohelet's signature frame, limiting his inquiry to what can be observed in the natural world without appeal to revelation or eschatology.*

1 The words of Qohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2 Vapor of vapors, says Qohelet.
Vapor of vapors — everything is vapor.

3 What lasting gain does a person have
from all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

4 A generation goes and a generation comes,
but the earth stands forever.

5 The sun rises and the sun sets,
then it pants back to the place where it rises again.

6 Going south, then turning north —
round and round the wind goes,
and on its circuits the wind returns.

7 All the streams flow to the sea,
but the sea is never full.
To the place where the streams flow,
there they return to flow again.

8 All things are wearisome —
more than anyone can express.
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.

9 What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done.
There is nothing new under the sun.

10 Is there anything of which someone might say, 'Look, this is new'? It has already existed in ages past, in times before us.

11 There is no remembrance of those who came before,
and even those yet to come will not be remembered
by those who follow after them.

12 I, Qohelet, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 I set my mind to investigate and explore by wisdom everything done under heaven. It is a grievous task God has given to human beings to be occupied with. 14 I have observed all the deeds done under the sun, and look — everything is vapor and a chasing after wind.

15 What is crooked cannot be straightened,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.

16 I said to myself, 'Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom beyond anyone who ruled before me over Jerusalem, and my mind has observed much wisdom and knowledge.' 17 I set my mind to understand wisdom and to understand madness and folly. I realized that this too is a chasing after wind.

18 For with much wisdom comes much vexation,
and whoever increases knowledge increases pain.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Qohelet is not a name but a title derived from qahal ('to assemble, to gather'). The form is a feminine participle used as a professional designation — 'the Assembler' or 'the Convener.' We retain the Hebrew title rather than translating it as 'Preacher' (KJV) or 'Teacher' (NIV), since neither captures the original sense. The Solomonic framing ('son of David, king in Jerusalem') establishes the literary persona through which the book conducts its philosophical experiment.

2. The rendering 'vapor' rather than 'vanity' (KJV) or 'meaningless' (NIV) recovers the physical concreteness of the Hebrew. Hevel is not an abstract philosophical concept but a sensory image — breath on a cold day, morning mist, steam rising from a pot. The word does not negate existence; it characterizes its duration and graspability.

2. The superlative construction hevel havalim appears only here and in 12:8, forming an inclusio that frames the entire book. Everything between these two declarations is contained within the thesis of vapor.

3. The word yitron ('profit, advantage, gain') is a commercial term — literally 'what is left over.' Qohelet frames life as an accounting problem: after all the effort, what is the net surplus? The implied answer is: nothing lasting. The phrase tachat ha-shemesh ('under the sun') appears here for the first time and will recur twenty-nine times. It establishes the boundaries of Qohelet's investigation: he is examining life as it can be observed in the visible world, without appeal to afterlife or divine revelation.

4. The poem on nature's cycles begins. Generations pass but the stage remains. The word olam ('forever, perpetuity') applied to the earth contrasts sharply with the transience of human life. The earth is the permanent backdrop against which the brief drama of each generation plays out and is forgotten.

5. The verb sho'ef ('pants, gasps, hastens') personifies the sun as a runner straining to complete its circuit. This is not a joyful image like Psalm 19:5, where the sun is a bridegroom running with gladness — here the sun is exhausted, gasping its way back to the starting line only to run the same course again. The word choice turns the solar cycle from wonder into weariness.

6. The repetition of sovev ('turning, circling') three times in a single verse mimics the wind's endless circling through sound. The word ruach means both 'wind' and 'spirit' — an ambiguity Qohelet will exploit throughout the book. Here the wind's aimless cycling is exhibit B in the case for cosmic monotony.

7. The streams complete the triad: sun, wind, water — all moving ceaselessly, arriving nowhere new. The sea's refusal to fill despite endless inflow is the poem's most striking image of futility. Effort without accumulation. Motion without progress. The streams do not fail to reach the sea; they reach it and it makes no difference.

8. The word yege'im ('wearisome, toilsome') applies to devarim, which means both 'things' and 'words.' The ambiguity is deliberate: all things are wearying, and all words fail to capture it. The eye and ear — the primary channels of human perception — are insatiable. This is not a celebration of human curiosity but an indictment: we keep looking and listening and are never filled.

9. This is Qohelet's most famous line and the conclusion drawn from the nature poem. The parallel structure is perfectly symmetrical: what was / will be, what was done / will be done. The denial of novelty is radical — it challenges every human claim to innovation, discovery, and progress. Ein kol chadash tachat ha-shemesh: 'there is nothing at all new under the sun.'

10. Qohelet anticipates the objection and dismisses it. The rhetorical question expects 'no' as its answer. The phrase le-olamim ('for ages, in antiquity') pushes the denial of novelty back into deep time. Whatever seems new merely seems so because of failed memory.

11. The poem ends by diagnosing why the illusion of novelty persists: memory fails. The rishonim ('former ones') are forgotten, and the acharonim ('later ones') will be too. Each generation lives in the illusion that its experience is unprecedented because it cannot remember what came before. The loss of memory is not accidental but structural — it is how the cycle perpetuates itself.

12. The shift to first person marks the transition from the editor's frame (vv. 1-11) to Qohelet's own voice. The past tense 'was king' (hayiti melekh) is striking — it suggests looking back on kingship as a completed experience, which complicates the Solomonic fiction since Solomon reigned until death. The autobiographical section now begins.

13. The verb tur ('to explore, to spy out') is the same word used when Moses sent spies to 'tour' the land of Canaan (Numbers 13:2). Qohelet is conducting a reconnaissance of reality, surveying the terrain of human experience. The military-intelligence connotation adds urgency and purpose to what might otherwise seem like idle philosophizing.

13. The phrase inyan ra ('grievous task') frames the human drive to understand as a burden, not a gift. God assigned it, and it produces sorrow. This tension between divine sovereignty and human frustration runs through the entire book.

14. The phrase re'ut ruach ('chasing after wind' or 'shepherding wind') appears nine times in Ecclesiastes. The word re'ut may derive from ra'ah ('to shepherd, to feed') or from ra'ah ('to desire, to strive after'). Either reading yields the same image: trying to herd the wind or grasping at it — an exercise in futility. The pairing of hevel ('vapor') with re'ut ruach ('chasing wind') creates Qohelet's most characteristic expression: life is both insubstantial and ungraspable.

15. A proverbial couplet summarizing Qohelet's finding. The world contains structural defects (me'uvat, 'twisted, crooked') and deficiencies (chesron, 'lack, deficit') that human effort cannot repair or even quantify. The passive voice suggests these are not accidental but built into the fabric of reality.

Wisdom can diagnose the crookedness but cannot fix it.

16. The phrase dibarti ani im-libbi ('I spoke, I, with my heart') is Qohelet's characteristic mode of reflection — internal dialogue. The claim to surpass all predecessors in Jerusalem in wisdom reinforces the Solomonic persona (1 Kings 4:29-31 attributes unmatched wisdom to Solomon). But the claim is set up only to be undercut in the next two verses.

17. Qohelet's method includes studying the full spectrum — not just wisdom but holelot ('madness, raving') and sikhlut ('folly, senselessness'). He needs the contrast to evaluate wisdom fairly. But even this comprehensive investigation leads to the same verdict: ra'yon ruach ('chasing after wind'), a variant of re'ut ruach in verse 14.

18. The parallel structure is precise: much wisdom / much vexation, increased knowledge / increased pain. The proportion is direct — wisdom and suffering grow together. This verse will be tested and complicated throughout the book as Qohelet continues to pursue wisdom despite its cost, never abandoning the enterprise he describes as painful.

2

Summary: *Qohelet conducts a series of experiments in pleasure, achievement, and wealth to determine whether any of them yield lasting gain. He builds houses, plants vineyards, acquires servants, accumulates silver and gold, and denies himself nothing his eyes desire. The verdict: all of it is vapor and chasing after wind. He then compares wisdom to folly and concedes that wisdom has an advantage — the wise person sees where he is going — but both the wise and the fool meet the same end in death. The chapter climaxes with Qohelet hating life and hating his toil, since he must leave everything to a successor who may be a fool. The chapter closes with the first of several 'enjoyment passages': there is nothing better than to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in one's work, for even this comes from God's hand.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This chapter is the most sustained first-person experiment in the Hebrew Bible. Qohelet does not argue from theory but from lived experience: 'I built, I planted, I acquired, I gathered.' He is not a detached philosopher but a participant-observer who has tested every avenue the ancient world considered a path to the good life. The shocking element is not his verdict — that pleasure and achievement are vapor — but his honesty about the process. He admits the pleasure was real (v. 10), the wisdom was genuine (v. 13), and the achievement was impressive (vv. 4-8). None of it was fake. It was simply temporary. The hatred of life in verse 17 is not depression but the rational conclusion of a man who has exhausted every human option for permanent satisfaction.*

Translation Friction: *The enjoyment passage in verses 24-26 creates an apparent contradiction: if everything is vapor, why commend eating and drinking? This tension is fundamental to Ecclesiastes and cannot be resolved by choosing one pole over the other. Qohelet simultaneously maintains that nothing lasts and that present enjoyment is a genuine gift from God. The resolution, if there is one, lies in the distinction between permanent gain (yitron) and present gift (mattanah). There is no lasting profit, but there are real moments of God-given pleasure. Learning to receive them without clutching them is, perhaps, the book's central spiritual discipline.*

Connections: *The catalog of achievements in verses 4-8 parallels the description of Solomon's wealth in 1 Kings 4-10. The enjoyment commendation echoes the Egyptian harper's songs and Siduri's advice to Gilgamesh: 'Let your belly be full, enjoy yourself always by day and by night.' But Qohelet anchors his enjoyment in God's hand (v. 24), which distinguishes his counsel from purely secular carpe diem. The phrase 'under the sun' continues to frame the investigation.*

1 I said to myself, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure — enjoy what is good.' But look, this too was vapor. 2 Of laughter I said, 'It is senseless,' and of pleasure, 'What does it accomplish?' 3 I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine — my mind still guiding me with wisdom — and how to embrace folly, until I could see what is good for human beings to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. 4 I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself. I planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made gardens and parks for myself and planted in them every kind of fruit tree. 6 I made pools of water for myself to irrigate a forest of growing trees. 7 I acquired male and female servants and had servants born in my household. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone who came before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also amassed silver and gold — the treasuries of kings and provinces. I provided myself with male and female singers and the delights of human

beings — concubines in great number. 9I became greater and wealthier than anyone before me in Jerusalem, and through it all my wisdom stayed with me. 10Whatever my eyes desired I did not withhold from them. I refused my heart no pleasure, for my heart found joy in all my toil — and this was my reward from all my toil. 11Then I surveyed everything my hands had done and the toil I had labored to accomplish, and look — everything was vapor and chasing after wind. There was no lasting gain under the sun. 12Then I turned to consider wisdom alongside madness and folly. For what can the one who comes after the king do? Only what has already been done. 13And I saw that wisdom has an advantage over folly, just as light has an advantage over darkness. 14The wise person's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. Yet I also know that one fate overtakes them both. 15Then I said to myself, 'What happens to the fool will happen to me as well. So why have I been so excessively wise?' And I said to myself that this too is vapor. 16For the wise person, like the fool, will not be remembered forever — in the days to come everything will already be forgotten. How can it be that the wise person dies just like the fool? 17So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for everything is vapor and chasing after wind. 18I hated all the results of my toil at which I had worked under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. 19And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet he will have control over everything I toiled at and applied my wisdom to under the sun. This too is vapor. 20So I turned to let my heart despair over all the toil at which I had worked under the sun. 21For here is a person whose toil was done with wisdom, knowledge, and skill — yet he must hand over his portion to someone who did not work for it. This too is vapor, and a terrible wrong. 22For what does a person gain from all his toil and the striving of his heart at which he toils under the sun? 23For all his days are filled with pain, and his occupation is vexation. Even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vapor. 24There is nothing better for a person than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his toil. This too, I saw, is from the hand of God. 25For who can eat or who can experience anything apart from him? 26For to the person who is good in his sight, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy; but to the one who misses the mark, he gives the task of gathering and collecting, only to hand it over to the one who is good before God. This too is vapor and chasing after wind.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Qohelet announces a new experiment: testing pleasure (simchah) as a candidate for lasting meaning. The address to himself in second person ('I will test you') creates a clinical distance — he is both experimenter and subject. The verdict ('this too was vapor') comes before the evidence, signaling that the outcome was already clear.
2. The word meholal ('mad, senseless') from halal ('to be boisterous, to rave') echoes the holelot ('madness') of 1:17. Laughter and pleasure are not condemned as sinful but as unproductive — they accomplish nothing lasting.
3. The verb tarti ('I explored, I investigated') suggests deliberate, methodical testing. Qohelet's genius as an experimenter shows here: he indulges in wine while maintaining intellectual control ('my mind still guiding with wisdom'). This is not reckless hedonism but controlled experimentation. The phrase mispar yeme chayyehem ('the number of the days of their lives') underscores how brief the testing window is.
4. The catalog of achievements begins. Each item echoes Solomon's building program (1 Kings 5-7). The repetition of 'for myself' (li) in the Hebrew emphasizes the self-directed nature of the enterprise.
5. The word pardesim ('parks, orchards') is a Persian loanword (from pairidaeza, the source of English 'paradise'). Its presence is one of the linguistic markers of the book's late date, long after Solomon's era.
6. The pools recall Solomon's pools south of Bethlehem. The image of human engineering conquering aridity connects back to the streams-and-sea imagery of 1:7 — but here, unlike nature's futile cycles, the water is directed to a purpose. Qohelet's engineering actually works. The question is whether it matters.
7. The bene bayit ('sons of the house') were slaves born within the household, considered more loyal than purchased slaves. The competitive comparison — 'more than anyone before me in Jerusalem' — sustains the Solomonic persona and underscores the scale of the experiment.
8. The phrase shiddah ve-shiddot is one of the most disputed words in Ecclesiastes. The precise meaning is uncertain — suggestions include 'chests,' 'concubines,' 'cup-bearers,' or 'luxuries.' The context of human delights and the superlative form (shiddah ve-shiddot, like hevel havalim) suggests sexual pleasure, and we follow the traditional interpretation of 'concubines' as the final item in a progression from material to sensory to intimate pleasure.
8. The word segullat ('treasuries, special possessions') is used elsewhere of Israel as God's 'treasured possession' (Exodus 19:5). Here it refers to royal wealth — an ironic reversal.

9. The crucial note: af chokhmati amdah li ('my wisdom stayed with me'). Qohelet did not lose his judgment in the process. The experiment was conducted under controlled conditions. Whatever verdict he reaches about pleasure and achievement cannot be dismissed as the regret of someone who lost himself in excess.

10. This verse is the honest center of the chapter. The pleasure was real. The joy was genuine. Qohelet does not deny that his achievements brought him satisfaction. The word cheleq ('portion, share, reward') is important — it is the dividend the effort actually paid. But as the next verse will clarify, this portion is all there is. There is no yitron ('lasting surplus') beyond it.

11. The verdict on the pleasure experiment is identical to the verdict on the wisdom experiment (1:14): hevel u-re'ut ruach ('vapor and chasing after wind'). The added phrase ein yitron tachat ha-shemesh ('there is no lasting gain under the sun') makes explicit what was implied. The pleasure was real (v. 10) but not lasting. The experience yielded a portion but not a surplus.

12. The rhetorical question acknowledges the unique advantage of the Solomonic persona: no one will be able to conduct this experiment on a grander scale. If the king with unlimited resources found no lasting gain, no successor can expect to find it either.

13. Qohelet is not anti-wisdom. He freely concedes its superiority over folly — the comparison to light versus darkness is the strongest possible endorsement. The question is not whether wisdom is better but whether it is enough.

14. The phrase 'eyes in his head' is a compact metaphor for foresight and awareness. The miqreh echad ('one fate') that overtakes both is death — Qohelet does not say the word yet but the following verses make it explicit.

15. The question 'why have I been wise?' is not a rejection of wisdom but an anguished recognition of its limits. If both wise and foolish end in death, what advantage does all that extra wisdom provide? The answer — which Qohelet will spend the rest of the book working out — is: a real but temporary one.

16. The complaint echoes 1:11 — memory fails, and the wise are forgotten along with the foolish. The exclamation ve-eikh yamut he-chakham im ha-kesil ('how can it be that the wise dies alongside the fool!') expresses genuine outrage. This is not resignation but protest.

17. The Hebrew is blunt: ve-sane'ti et ha-chayyim ('I hated life'). The verb sane ('to hate') is unqualified. This is the most extreme emotional statement in the chapter and one of the most striking in all of wisdom literature. Qohelet does not say he was disappointed or disillusioned — he says he hated life. The cause is not personal suffering but the structural injustice of death erasing all distinctions.

18. The hatred extends from life itself (v. 17) to the products of labor. The reason is not that the work was bad but that its fruits must be transferred to an unknown successor. Inheritance forces Qohelet to confront the fact that ownership is temporary — the builder never gets to keep what he built.

19. The uncertainty about the heir's character adds insult to the injury of losing one's work. Qohelet's wisdom cannot even guarantee that the successor will be competent. The verb yishlat ('will have control, will rule over') emphasizes that the heir gains authority over what he did not earn.

20. The verb ya'esh ('to despair, to give up hope') marks the emotional low point. Qohelet deliberately allows himself to feel the full weight of the realization. This is intellectual honesty carried to its painful conclusion.

21. The word kishron ('skill, success, competence') appears only in Ecclesiastes. The injustice is stated plainly: skill and effort produce results that are then given to someone with no investment. The phrase ra'ah rabbah ('a terrible wrong, a great evil') is stronger than the usual hevel verdict — this is not just transient, it is unjust.

22. The question reprises 1:3 but adds ra'yon libbo ('the striving of his heart') — not just physical labor but the mental and emotional investment. The rhetorical question expects the answer: nothing lasting.

23. The portrait of sleepless anxiety completes the picture. Toil does not end at sunset — the mind continues to churn through the night. The word makh'ovim ('pains, sorrows') and ka'as ('vexation, anger') characterize the inner life of the achiever as one of chronic distress.

24. The shift from 'I hated life' (v. 17) to 'eat, drink, and find satisfaction' (v. 24) is jarring but intentional. Qohelet's counsel is not hedonism — it is received enjoyment. The hand of God as the source transforms this from secular advice into theological affirmation: even in a vapor-filled world, God gives moments of genuine goodness.

25. The Hebrew text is ambiguous — 'apart from him' (mimmenni) could refer to God or to Qohelet. Some manuscripts read 'apart from me,' reinforcing the Solomonic persona (who had more opportunity to eat and enjoy than Solomon?). We follow the reading that refers to God, consistent with the theological framing of verse 24: all enjoyment ultimately comes from God.

26. The word choteh ('sinner, one who misses the mark') is rendered here without the heavy theological freight that 'sinner' carries in English. The Hebrew root chata means 'to miss' (as an archer misses a target). The person who misses the mark accumulates wealth that ultimately passes to the person who is tov lifne ha-Elohim ('good before God'). But even this seemingly just distribution is declared vapor — Qohelet refuses to let any system, even a moral one, claim permanence.

3

Summary: *Chapter 3 opens with the most famous poem in Ecclesiastes: 'a time for everything' — fourteen pairs of opposites organized in a tightly structured catalogue of human experience. From this poem, Qohelet draws the conclusion that God has made everything appropriate in its time and has placed eternity (olam) in the human heart, yet no one can grasp the full scope of God's work from beginning to end. The chapter then confronts the scandal of injustice in the place where justice should exist, raises the disturbing question of whether humans have any advantage over animals in death, and closes with another commendation of present enjoyment as one's proper portion.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The 'time for everything' poem is one of the most recognized passages in world literature, but its function within the argument is frequently missed. It is not a comforting message about divine timing. It is an argument about human powerlessness. The poem's twenty-eight activities (fourteen pairs of opposites) cover the full range of human experience, but the human being does not choose the timing. God sets the times; humans merely undergo them. Verse 11 is the chapter's theological center and one of the most debated verses in the Hebrew Bible: God has placed olam ('eternity, the distant past and future, something beyond comprehension') in the human heart, but ha-adam ('the human being') cannot find out (lo yimtsa) what God has done me-rosh ve-ad sof ('from beginning to end'). We carry within us a sense that there is more than the present moment, yet we cannot access it. This is the deepest form of hevel: to be built for something you cannot reach.*

Translation Friction: *The word olam in verse 11 is notoriously difficult. It can mean 'eternity,' 'the remote past,' 'the far future,' 'the world,' or 'ignorance' (if emended to elem, 'hiddenness'). The choice shapes the theology of the verse entirely. We retain 'eternity' as the most widely attested meaning while acknowledging the ambiguity in the notes. The comparison of humans and animals in verses 19-21 is deliberately provocative: Qohelet says both share one ruach ('breath/spirit') and both go to the same place (dust). His rhetorical question 'Who knows whether the human spirit ascends upward and the animal spirit descends?' is not denying the afterlife but admitting that empirical observation cannot confirm it.*

Connections: *The poem's opening line le-khol zeman ('for everything a season') echoes the priestly calendar language of Leviticus 23 and Numbers 28-29, where appointed times (mo'adim) structure Israel's worship. But here the appointed times are not festivals — they are birth and death, killing and healing, war and peace. The human-animal comparison echoes Genesis 2-3 (both formed from the ground, both returning to dust) and anticipates Psalm 49:12,20 ('a person in splendor who does not understand is like the beasts that perish').*

1 For everything there is an appointed time,
and a season for every matter under heaven:

2 A time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted;

3 A time to take life and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build up;

4 A time to weep and a time for laughter,
a time for mourning and a time for dancing;

5 A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;

6 A time to seek and a time to lose,
a time to keep and a time to throw away;

7A time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak;

8A time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

9What lasting gain does the worker have from his toil? 10I have seen the burden God has placed on human beings to occupy them. 11He has made everything fitting in its time. He has also placed eternity in the human heart — yet no one can discover what God has done from beginning to end. 12I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good during their lives. 13Moreover, that everyone should eat and drink and experience good in all their toil — this is the gift of God. 14I know that everything God does will endure forever. Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God has done this so that people will stand in awe before him. 15What is has already been, and what will be has already been. And God seeks out what has been driven away. 16And I saw something else under the sun: in the place of justice, wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there. 17I said to myself, 'God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every deed.' 18I said to myself concerning human beings: God tests them so that they may see that they are, in themselves, like animals. 19For what happens to human beings and what happens to animals is the same — as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over animals, for everything is vapor. 20All go to one place. All come from dust, and all return to dust. 21Who knows whether the human spirit ascends upward and the animal spirit descends downward into the earth? 22So I saw that there is nothing better than for a person to find joy in his work, for that is his portion. Who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The word zeman ('appointed time, season') is a late Hebrew / Aramaic term (compare Daniel 2:16; Esther 9:27), another marker of the book's post-exilic date. The word et ('time, moment, occasion') refers to the specific appropriate moment for each action. Chefets ('matter, affair, desire') encompasses the full range of human activities catalogued in the following verses.
2. The poem opens with the most fundamental pair: birth and death — the two events no human controls. The shift to agricultural imagery (plant / uproot) grounds the cosmic claim in the daily rhythm of farming life. Each pair follows the pattern et + infinitive, creating a rhythmic cadence that carries through all fourteen pairs.
3. The 'time to kill' is startling in its directness — Qohelet does not soften it. The pairs now move through violence and restoration, destruction and construction. The poem makes no moral judgments about these activities; it simply asserts that each has its appointed moment.
4. The emotional pairs — weeping/laughing, mourning/dancing — move from the physical world to the interior world. Sefod ('to mourn, to beat the breast') is the formal mourning ritual; raqod ('to dance, to skip') is its opposite. Both are public, communal activities with appointed occasions.
5. Scattering and gathering stones may refer to clearing a field for planting or ruining an enemy's field (2 Kings 3:25), or it may carry a sexual connotation (as in the Targum and Midrash). The embrace/refrain pair moves into the intimate sphere — there are seasons for closeness and seasons for distance, and forcing either at the wrong time violates the order.
6. The seeking/losing and keeping/discarding pairs address the human relationship to possessions and pursuits. The 'time to lose' (et le-abbed) does not mean losing accidentally but accepting loss — letting go. The 'time to throw away' (et le-hashlik) is the deliberate act of releasing what one has held.
7. Tearing (qara) refers to the mourning ritual of tearing one's garment; mending (tafor) is the restoration that follows. The silence/speech pair is one of the most potent in the poem — knowing when to speak and when to stay silent is one of wisdom literature's highest skills (Proverbs 10:19; 17:28).
8. The poem closes with its most sweeping pairs: love/hate and war/peace. These final four words encompass the entirety of human relational and political life. The poem ends not on love or peace but on shalom — which may be deliberate, leaving the reader with the word for wholeness and well-being as the last note.
9. The question from 1:3 returns. After the beautiful poem, the conclusion is sobering: if God controls the timing of everything, what surplus (yitron) does human effort produce? The poem was not a comfort — it was evidence that human beings do not control the most important moments of their lives.
10. The word inyan ('burden, occupation, business') reprises 1:13. God gives humanity tasks that fill time but do not yield lasting gain. The verb la'anot bo ('to be occupied with it, to be afflicted by it') carries overtones of both busyness and suffering.
11. The word olam is the crux. It most commonly means 'eternity, perpetuity, the ages' (as in le-olam va-ed, 'forever and ever'). Some scholars emend to elem ('hiddenness, ignorance'), which would yield 'he has placed ignorance in their hearts.' We retain olam because the tension between having

eternity planted within and being unable to comprehend God's work is precisely Qohelet's point — it would be flattened by reading 'ignorance.'

11. The phrase me-rosh ve-ad sof ('from beginning to end') describes the totality of God's action through time. Humans can perceive fragments — individual times and seasons — but never the whole tapestry.

12. The second enjoyment passage. Given the inability to comprehend God's total work, the proper response is simchah ('joy, gladness') and la'asot tov ('to do good'). Whether 'do good' means moral goodness or 'experience good things' is debated. Both readings are legitimate — Qohelet likely intends the overlap.

13. The word mattat ('gift') from natan ('to give') is key. Enjoyment is not earned, achieved, or manufactured — it is given. Mattat Elohim ('gift of God') anchors the enjoyment counsel in theology: even when the big picture is incomprehensible, God gives small gifts — food, drink, satisfaction — that can be received in the present.

14. A statement of divine sovereignty: God's work is permanent (le-olam) and unalterable. Humans can neither add to it nor subtract from it. The purpose clause — she-yir'u mi-lefanav ('so that they will fear before him') — connects God's inscrutable permanence to human reverence. The inability to understand or modify God's work is itself pedagogical: it teaches awe.

15. The first half repeats the cyclical view of 1:9. The second half — ve-ha-Elohim yevaqesh et nirdaf ('God seeks what has been driven away / pursued') — is enigmatic. The nirdaf ('the pursued, the driven away') may refer to past time, to the oppressed, or to events that have been displaced. The image of God recovering what has been lost or persecuted adds a note of justice to the cyclical worldview.

16. The double occurrence of resha ('wickedness') in the very places designated for mishpat ('justice') and tsedeq ('righteousness') is devastating. The corruption is not in the marketplace or the battlefield but in the courts — the institutions designed to correct injustice are themselves unjust. This observation drives the crisis of the next verses.

17. Qohelet's response to the injustice of verse 16 is an appeal to divine judgment — but it is an appeal he makes to himself (be-libbi, 'in my heart'), not a confident public declaration. The phrase et le-khol chefets ('a time for every matter') echoes the poem's opening (v. 1), suggesting that even judgment has its appointed time, though it may not be visible now.

18. The phrase she-hem behemah hemmah lahem ('they are animals, they, to themselves') is syntactically awkward and deliberately provocative. Qohelet is not making a biological claim but a mortality claim: viewed from the perspective of death, humans and animals are indistinguishable. God's purpose in this (levaram, 'to purify them, to test them, to make clear to them') is pedagogical — the recognition of shared mortality is meant to produce humility.

19. The word ruach here means 'breath' (the animating life-force) rather than 'spirit' in the theological sense. Qohelet's point is biological: both humans and animals breathe, and when the breathing stops, both are equally dead. The 'no advantage' (motar...ayin) echoes the yitron question of 1:3 and 3:9.

20. The echo of Genesis 3:19 ('dust you are and to dust you shall return') is unmistakable. But Genesis applied this only to the human; Qohelet extends it to all living things. The universality of dust-origin and dust-destination is the empirical ground for the 'no advantage' claim. Ha-kol ('all, everything') appears three times, hammering the universality home.

21. This question is not a denial of the afterlife but an epistemological admission: empirical observation cannot confirm what happens to the ruach after death. Qohelet's method — observing what happens 'under the sun' — reaches its limit here. The traditional belief that the human spirit ascends may be true, but Qohelet's investigative framework cannot verify it. The question is honest, not heretical.

22. The third enjoyment passage closes the chapter. The word cheleq ('portion') returns from 2:10 — present joy is what life actually yields. The final question ('who can bring him to see what will happen after him?') seals the argument: since the future is inaccessible, the present is all you have. Receive it.

4

Summary: *Qohelet turns his attention to the social dimensions of life under the sun. He observes the tears of the oppressed who have no comforter, concluding that the dead are better off than the living and the unborn better still. He examines the competitive nature of human toil, the loneliness of the solitary worker with no companion, and then offers one of the book's most tender observations: two are better than one. The famous 'threefold cord' proverb appears here. The chapter closes with a reflection on the fickleness of popular acclaim — even a king's favor is vapor.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This chapter contains Qohelet's most sustained engagement with social injustice. The repetition of 'no comforter' (ein lahem menachem) in verse 1 is devastating — it appears twice in a single verse, as though Qohelet cannot get past the absence. The shift from cosmic observations about nature and death to street-level observations about oppression and loneliness reveals Qohelet as more than a philosopher; he is a witness. The 'two are better than one' section (vv. 9-12) is often*

extracted for wedding readings, but in context it is a survival strategy: the world is cold and dangerous, and companionship is the only reliable protection against it.

Translation Friction: *Verse 2-3, where Qohelet declares the dead more fortunate than the living and the unborn more fortunate than either, pushes against the Hebrew Bible's general affirmation of life. This is not suicidal ideation but a rhetorical strategy: if oppression is this severe, then not being born is the only way to avoid witnessing it. The logic is about suffering avoidance, not life-denial. It should be read alongside Job 3, where a similar wish for non-existence arises from a similar confrontation with unjust suffering.*

Connections: *The 'no comforter' language echoes Lamentations 1:2,9,16,17,21, where Jerusalem after the exile has 'no one to comfort her.' The two-are-better-than-one section connects to the creation narrative's 'it is not good for the human to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). The threefold cord metaphor has parallels in Mesopotamian wisdom literature, particularly the Sumerian proverb collection. The fickle king section anticipates the court wisdom of chapters 8-10.*

1 Again I looked and saw all the acts of oppression committed under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed — and they had
no comforter. Power was on the side of their oppressors — and they had no comforter. 2 So I declared the dead — who have
already died — more fortunate than the living who are still alive. 3 But better off than both is the one who has never existed,
who has never seen the evil deeds done under the sun. 4 And I saw that all toil and all skillful work spring from one person's
envy of another. This too is vapor and chasing after wind. 5 The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh.

6 Better one handful with tranquility
than two fistfuls with toil and chasing after wind.

7 Again I saw vapor under the sun: 8 There is a man who is alone, with no companion — he has neither son nor brother. Yet
there is no end to his toil, and his eye is never satisfied with wealth. 'For whom am I toiling,' he never asks, 'and depriving
myself of good things?' This too is vapor and a miserable occupation. 9 Two are better than one, for they have a good return
for their toil. 10 For if one falls, the other can lift up his companion. But pity the one who falls with no one to help him up. 11 Al
so, if two lie down together, they keep warm; but how can one person keep warm alone? 12 And if someone overpowers one
person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. 13 Better a poor but wise youth than an old but
foolish king who no longer knows how to accept a warning. 14 For the youth came out of prison to become king, even though
he had been born poor in the king's own realm. 15 I saw all the living who move about under the sun rally to the side of the
second youth, who would succeed him. 16 There was no end to all the people he led, yet those who come later will not
celebrate him. This too is vapor and chasing after wind.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The word menachem ('comforter') is from nacham ('to comfort, to console'). Its doubled absence creates one of the most emotionally raw moments in Ecclesiastes. The comforter is not God, not a human advocate, not a legal system — the word is left open, and the absence is total.
2. The verb shibbachti ('I praised, I congratulated, I declared fortunate') does not mean Qohelet envies death in the abstract. In the context of verses 1-3, the logic is specific: given the relentless oppression with no comforter, the dead have at least escaped the sight of it. The living must continue witnessing what they cannot change.
3. The escalation — the living < the dead < the never-born — is Qohelet's most extreme statement. The never-born person (asher aden lo hayah, 'who has not yet come into being') is most fortunate because he has not witnessed (lo ra'ah) the evil that happens under the sun. This is an argument from suffering-avoidance, not from nihilism. Compare Job 3:11-16.
4. The word qin'ah ('envy, jealousy, rivalry') diagnoses the hidden engine of human achievement: competition with one's neighbor. The kishron ha-ma'aseh ('skill of the work, excellence of achievement') is real, but its motivation is envy. Qohelet does not deny the quality of the work — he exposes its root.
5. A proverbial image of the sluggard who refuses to work. Folding the hands is the posture of idleness (Proverbs 6:10; 24:33). 'Consuming his own flesh' means self-destruction through inactivity — the fool's laziness devours him. This proverb qualifies verse 4: if all toil springs from envy, does that mean one should stop working? No — the alternative is self-consumption.
6. The 'better than' (tov...min) proverb offers the middle path between envy-driven overwork (v. 4) and lazy self-destruction (v. 5). One handful (melo khaf) with nachat ('rest, tranquility, quiet') is superior to two fistfuls (melo chofnayim) with amal ('toil') and re'ut ruach ('chasing after wind'). The measure is not quantity but quality of life.

7. A transitional formula introducing the next observation. The brief, unadorned statement signals a new case study in futility.

8. The portrait of the solitary workaholic is drawn with precision: no son (ben), no brother (ach), no second person (sheni) at all — and yet he works endlessly. The question he never asks ('for whom am I toiling?') is the one that would free him. His eye's insatiability echoes 1:8. The tragedy is not that he lacks companionship but that he does not notice the lack.

9. After the portrait of the lonely man, the remedy: companionship. The sakhar tov ('good reward, good return') is not cosmic yitron but practical benefit — two workers produce more than one. The 'better than' form continues from verse 6, now applied to social rather than economic calculation.

10. The first of three practical illustrations. Falling — whether physical stumbling on a road or metaphorical collapse — requires another person's help. The exclamation ve-ilo ('but alas, but pity') expresses genuine sorrow for the solitary person who falls alone.

11. The second illustration: warmth. In ancient Palestine, nights could be bitterly cold, especially for travelers. Sharing body heat was a practical necessity, not merely a comfort. The rhetorical question ('how can one keep warm alone?') has no answer — you cannot.

12. The third illustration: defense against attack. Two can stand where one would fall. The threefold cord proverb elevates the principle beyond pairs — the strongest arrangement is three strands woven together. The ha-chut ha-meshullash ('the threefold cord') is a proverbial image, likely drawn from rope-making practice. Qohelet does not identify the third strand — it may be God, a child, a community, or simply the principle that more connections mean greater resilience.

13. A new 'better than' proverb introducing the chapter's final section on political power. The contrast is extreme: a yeled misken ('a poor child') versus a melekh zaqen ('an old king'). Wisdom and teachability outweigh age, wealth, and power. The key deficiency of the old king is that he lo yada le-hizzaher od ('no longer knows how to be warned') — he has become un-teachable.

14. The narrative illustration: a prisoner rises to the throne. The phrase bet ha-asurim ('the house of prisoners, the prison') suggests the youth's rise was from the lowest social position. The born-poor detail (nolad rash, 'born destitute') underscores that his success owed nothing to privilege. The story's point is that even this remarkable ascent is about to be declared vapor.

15. The phrase ha-yeled ha-sheni ('the second youth') introduces a successor — the cycle continues. The crowd follows the new leader. The verb ya'amod tachtav ('who will stand in his place') is the language of political succession.

16. The final verdict: even the wise youth who rose from prison to the throne will be forgotten by the next generation. The acharonim ('those who come later') will not rejoice in him — his fame is temporary. Political power, like everything else under the sun, is vapor. The observation echoes 1:11: no one is remembered for long.

5

Summary: *The chapter opens with a rare direct instruction on how to approach God: guard your steps when you go to the house of God, let your words be few, and fulfill your vows. Qohelet then turns to the familiar theme of oppression, noting the bureaucratic chain of exploitation where official watches over official. The second half addresses the futility of wealth: the one who loves money is never satisfied, the rich man's sleep is disturbed, and a devastating misfortune can wipe out everything, leaving a man naked as the day he was born. The chapter closes with the fourth enjoyment passage: to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in one's toil during the few days God gives is itself God's gift.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The opening verses (1-7) are the only sustained passage in Ecclesiastes that sounds like conventional religious instruction. Qohelet, who elsewhere questions everything, here speaks with uncharacteristic directness about reverence before God. The shift is striking: the skeptic becomes the preacher. But even here, the counsel is rooted in Qohelet's characteristic realism — God is in heaven and you are on earth, so keep your words few. The distance between God and humanity is not a theological problem to solve but a fact to respect. The poverty-at-death image (vv. 15-16) — arriving naked and departing naked, carrying nothing — will echo through centuries of literature and be directly quoted in Job 1:21 (which may be the older text that Qohelet draws from).*

Translation Friction: *The Hebrew versification of chapter 5 differs from the English. What is 5:1 in Hebrew is 4:17 in many English versions, shifting the entire chapter by one verse. We follow the Hebrew versification throughout. The phrase 'do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin' (v. 5) is textually difficult — 'flesh' (basar) here likely means 'body' or 'self' rather than 'physical flesh,' and the 'messenger' (mal'akh) before whom one speaks may be a priest, a temple official, or an angelic being. The ambiguity is preserved in the rendering.*

Connections: *The vow-keeping instruction echoes Deuteronomy 23:21-23 ('when you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not delay fulfilling it'). The 'God is in heaven, you are on earth' theology connects to Isaiah 55:8-9 ('my thoughts are not your thoughts'). The naked-at-birth/naked-at-death image parallels Job 1:21 ('naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return'). The enjoyment passage (vv. 18-20) is the most developed so far and introduces the idea that God keeps a person occupied with the joy of his heart.*

1Do not be hasty with your mouth, and do not let your heart rush to bring a word before God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth — therefore let your words be few. 2For dreams come with many cares, and a fool's voice with many words. 3Wh en you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it, for he takes no pleasure in fools. Fulfill what you vow. 4Better not to vow at all than to vow and not fulfill it. 5Do not let your mouth lead your body into sin, and do not say before the messenger, 'It was a mistake.' Why should God be angry at your words and destroy the work of your hands? 6For in many dreams and many words there is much vapor. Rather, fear God. 7If you see oppression of the poor and the denial of justice and righteousness in a province, do not be astonished at the matter. For one official is watched by a higher one, and there are still higher ones over them. 8But the advantage of land is for everyone — even a king is served by the field. 9The one who loves money will never be satisfied with money, and the one who loves wealth will never be satisfied with income. This too is vapor. 10When goods increase, so do those who consume them. What benefit do their owners have except to look at them? 11 The sleep of the worker is sweet, whether he eats little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not let him sleep. 12There is a sickening evil I have seen under the sun: wealth hoarded by its owner to his own harm. 13That wealth was lost in a bad venture, and though he fathered a son, he has nothing in his hand. 14As he came from his mother's womb, so he will go again — naked as he arrived. He will carry nothing from his toil that he can take in his hand. 15This too is a sickening evil: exactly as he came, so he will go. What lasting gain is there for one who toils for the wind? 16Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness with much vexation, sickness, and anger. 17Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat and drink and experience good in all the toil at which one works under the sun during the few days of life God has given him — for this is his portion. 18Moreover, everyone to whom God has given wealth and possessions and the ability to enjoy them, to accept his portion and find joy in his toil — this is a gift of God. 19For he will not dwell much on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the joy of his heart.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The verb bahel ('to be hasty, to be alarmed') suggests reckless speech born of anxiety rather than reverence. The instruction addresses prayer and temple worship — the 'house of God' context from the Hebrew 4:17 (English 5:1 in some versions) carries over. The contrast between heaven and earth is cosmological but also relational: it defines the posture of the worshiper.
2. The proverb links two parallel phenomena: excessive cares produce disordered dreams, and excessive words mark the fool. The comparison implies that many words before God are as disjointed and useless as anxiety dreams — sound without substance.
3. The vow instruction echoes Deuteronomy 23:21-23 almost verbatim. The characterization of the vow-breaker as a kesil ('fool') places this in wisdom's moral framework: failing to keep a vow is not just wrong, it is foolish — it misreads the character of God.
4. The 'better than' proverb applies Qohelet's realism to religious practice: do not make promises to God that you cannot keep. The absence of a vow is preferable to a broken one. This is not discouraging vows but insisting on integrity in making them.
5. The mal'akh ('messenger') is likely a temple priest who collects vow offerings (Malachi 2:7 calls the priest a 'messenger of the LORD'). The excuse shegagah hi ('it was an inadvertent error') is the technical term for unintentional sin (Leviticus 4:2; Numbers 15:25). Qohelet warns against misusing this category to escape a deliberate vow.
6. The section closes with a terse command: et ha-Elohim yera ('fear God'). After all the warnings about hasty speech, unfulfilled vows, and many words, the summary is stark: reverence. The havalim ('vapors, futilities') associated with excessive dreaming and speaking are swept aside by the single imperative.
7. The word gavo'ah me-al gavo'ah ('high one above high one') describes a bureaucratic hierarchy of exploitation. Each official takes his cut and passes the responsibility upward. The instruction 'do not be astonished' (al titmah) is not a counsel of indifference but of realism — this is how power structures work. The chain of exploitation explains why reform is so difficult: the corruption is systemic.
8. This cryptic verse seems to assert that agricultural land is the one form of wealth that benefits all levels of society. Even the king depends on the field (sadeh) for food. The point may be that despite all the bureaucratic exploitation described in verse 7, the basic economy of the earth still functions and feeds everyone.

9. The proverb diagnoses the paradox of wealth: loving money (kessef) guarantees that money will never be enough. The verb yisba ('be satisfied, be sated') is the same word used for eating one's fill — the money-lover's hunger is insatiable. The parallel 'loves abundance / no income satisfies' reinforces the point: desire outpaces acquisition.

10. Wealth attracts dependents. As goods (tovah, 'good things') increase, the number of mouths increases proportionally. The owner's only exclusive benefit is re'ut einav ('the sight of his eyes') — he can look at his wealth even if he cannot consume it all himself. The kishron ('advantage, benefit') is purely visual.

11. A vivid contrast. The oved ('laborer, worker') sleeps sweetly because his body is tired and his mind is untroubled. The ashir ('rich man') lies awake because ha-sava ('the fullness, the abundance') generates anxiety — worry about loss, management, and protection. Wealth produces insomnia. This is one of Qohelet's sharpest social observations.

12. The phrase ra'ah cholah ('a sickening evil, a grievous ill') is stronger than the usual hevel verdict. The wealth that was supposed to protect becomes the very thing that harms. The word shamur ('guarded, hoarded, kept') suggests not just saving but clutching — the owner holds on and is destroyed by what he holds.

13. The inyan ra ('bad venture, evil occupation') that destroys the wealth may be a failed investment, a lawsuit, or a disaster. The result is that the son — the heir who was supposed to benefit — receives nothing. The phrase ein be-yado me'umah ('there is nothing at all in his hand') is total destitution.

14. The naked-at-birth/naked-at-death principle. The word arom ('naked, bare') marks both entrance and exit. The parallel with Job 1:21 is exact — whether Qohelet quotes Job or both draw from a common proverb, the point is identical: ownership is temporary. The phrase she-yolekh be-yado ('that he can carry in his hand') is poignantly physical — the hand that grasped and held and accumulated will be empty.

15. The 'sickening evil' verdict returns. The symmetry of coming and going (kol ummat she-ba ken yelekh, 'exactly as he came, so he goes') means no net change. The final question echoes 1:3 and uses the wind image: toiling for the wind is the same as chasing it — you end with nothing in your hands.

16. Eating in darkness (ba-choshekh yokhel) may be literal — too miserly to light a lamp — or metaphorical, suggesting a life shrouded in gloom. The three companions of his meals are ka'as ('vexation'), cholyo ('his sickness'), and qatsef ('fury, anger'). Wealth has produced not comfort but bitterness.

17. The fourth enjoyment passage. The word yafeh ('fitting, beautiful, appropriate') elevates eating and drinking from mere survival to something aesthetically right — this is how life should be lived. The phrase mispar yeme chayyav ('the few days of his life') reminds the reader that the window for enjoyment is small, which makes receiving it all the more urgent.

18. The key distinction: God gives both the wealth and the ability to enjoy it. Having wealth without the ability to enjoy it (which will be the subject of 6:1-2) is a curse. The word hishlito ('enabled him, empowered him, gave him dominion') means enjoyment itself requires divine enablement — it is not automatic.

19. The remarkable closing image: the person who receives God's gift of enjoyment does not brood over the brevity of life. The verb ma'aneh ('keeps occupied, responds, answers') suggests that God fills the person's heart with simchah ('joy') so that the transience of life does not become a source of despair. Joy is God's answer to the problem of vapor.

6

Summary: *Chapter 6 is the darkest meditation on wealth in the book. Qohelet describes a man to whom God gives riches, possessions, and honor — everything he could desire — but God does not enable him to enjoy them. A stranger consumes them instead. This is vapor and a grievous affliction. Qohelet then pushes the thought to its extreme: even if a man fathers a hundred children and lives for two thousand years, if he has not experienced good, the stillborn child is better off. The chapter closes with a series of rhetorical questions about human limitation: who knows what is good, who can tell what will happen, and what advantage does the wise person have?*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This chapter is the mirror image of 5:18-19. There, God gave both wealth and the ability to enjoy it; here, God gives wealth but withholds the ability to enjoy. The two passages together form one of Ecclesiastes' most disturbing theological claims: enjoyment is not a human achievement but a divine gift, and God sometimes withholds it without explanation. The man in verse 2 lacks nothing material, yet he cannot eat — the Hebrew lo yashlitennu ha-Elohim le-ekhol ('God does not enable him to eat') places the responsibility squarely on God. Qohelet does not explain why God would do this; he simply reports it. The stillborn comparison (vv. 3-5) is the most extreme version of the 'better not to be born' logic from 4:3.*

Translation Friction: *The claim that God gives wealth but withholds enjoyment raises acute theodicy questions. Qohelet does not resolve them. He does not say the man sinned, and he does not say God is unjust — he says it is hevel and choliy ra ('a grievous affliction'). The theological tension is left raw. Additionally, the comparison between a man with a hundred children and a stillborn pushes against the Hebrew Bible's overwhelming valuation of descendants (Genesis 12:2; Psalm 127:3-5). For Qohelet, offspring without enjoyment count for nothing.*

Connections: *The 'God does not enable him to enjoy' language inverts Deuteronomy's blessings-for-obedience framework (Deuteronomy 28:1-14), where God rewards faithfulness with material abundance and the enjoyment of it. Qohelet observes a world where the connection between obedience and enjoyment has broken. The stillborn image connects to Job 3:16 ('like a hidden stillborn, I would not exist'). The closing questions about human ignorance echo 3:11 ('no one can discover what God has done from beginning to end').*

1There is an evil I have seen under the sun, and it weighs heavily on humanity: 2A man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing his appetite desires — yet God does not enable him to enjoy any of it, and a stranger consumes it instead. This is vapor and a grievous affliction. 3If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years — however many the days of his years may be — but his appetite is not satisfied with good things, and he does not even receive a proper burial, I say the stillborn child is better off than he. 4For the stillborn arrives in vapor and departs in darkness, and its name is covered in darkness. 5It has never seen the sun or known anything, yet it has more rest than that man. 6Even if he lived a thousand years twice over but never experienced good — do not all go to the same place? 7All of a person's toil is for his mouth, yet his appetite is never filled. 8For what advantage does the wise person have over the fool? What advantage does the poor person have who knows how to conduct himself before the living? 9Better what the eyes can see than the wandering of desire. This too is vapor and chasing after wind. 10Whatever exists has already been named, and what a human being is has been determined. He cannot contend with the one who is stronger than he. 11For the more words there are, the more vapor there is. What advantage is that to a person? 12For who knows what is good for a person during the few days of his vaporous life, which he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell anyone what will happen after him under the sun?

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The phrase rabbah hi al ha-adam ('it is great/heavy upon the human') indicates this is not a rare case but a widespread burden. Qohelet introduces a case study that reverses the positive enjoyment teaching of 5:18-19.
2. The theological weight of this verse falls on God as the agent who both gives and withholds. Qohelet offers no explanation for why God would give wealth but block enjoyment. The choliy ra ('evil sickness, grievous disease') language treats this condition as a kind of pathology — it is not just unfortunate, it is affliction.
3. The hyperbole (a hundred children, many years) emphasizes that quantity of life and descendants cannot compensate for the absence of satisfaction (lo tisba min ha-tovah, 'his appetite is not filled with good'). The added detail of no burial (qevurah lo haytah lo) is the final indignity — in Israelite culture, lack of proper burial was a curse (Jeremiah 22:19). The nefel ('stillborn, miscarriage') is declared tov mimmennu ('better than he').
4. The stillborn's existence is characterized by hevel ('vapor') and choshekh ('darkness'). It comes and goes without light, without name, without memory. Yet even this shadowed non-existence is preferable to a long life without satisfaction.
5. The word nachat ('rest, tranquility') is the key comparison. The stillborn, though it never saw the sun (shemesh) and never knew (yada) anything, possesses what the wealthy, long-lived, unsatisfied man does not: rest. The absence of experience is, in this case, an advantage over the presence of unrelieved frustration.
6. The hypothetical extends to absurd longevity: two thousand years. Even at that scale, life without tovah ('good, goodness, enjoyment') is worthless. The rhetorical question ('do not all go to the same place?') refers to death and echoes 3:20 — all return to dust. Length of life cannot solve the problem of quality of life.
7. The observation is biological and metaphorical at once: all work exists to feed the mouth (le-fihu), yet the nefesh ('appetite, soul, desire') is never satisfied (lo timmale, 'is not filled'). The gap between effort (amal) and satisfaction (male) is permanent. Toil feeds the body but cannot satisfy the deeper hunger.
8. Two rhetorical questions, both expecting the answer 'none — at least with respect to satisfying the appetite.' The phrase yodea la-halokh neged ha-chayyim ('knows how to walk before the living') describes the poor person with social skill — even he, despite knowing how to navigate society, gains no advantage in the struggle against insatiable desire.

9. The proverb counsels contentment with what is present (mar'eh einayim, 'the sight of the eyes' — what you can actually see) rather than the restless roaming of appetite (halokh nefesh, 'the walking of the soul/desire'). But even this contentment is declared hevel — Qohelet cannot let even good advice escape the vapor verdict.

10. The 'already named' (kevar niqra shemo) echoes the creation narrative where God names things into existence (Genesis 1) and Adam names the animals (Genesis 2:19-20). What a person is (adam) has been determined — the boundaries are fixed. The 'one stronger' (she-taqqif mimmennu) is God. Humans cannot argue their way out of their limitations.

11. The word devarim means both 'words' and 'things.' The ambiguity is likely intentional: both excessive speech and excessive activity produce more hevel without producing more benefit. The question 'what advantage to a person?' (mah yoter la-adam) echoes the yitron question from 1:3 once more.

12. The chapter closes with two questions that define the limits of human knowledge. The first — 'who knows what is good?' — challenges the assumption that we can identify our own best interest. The second — 'who can tell what will happen after?' — challenges the assumption that we can plan for the future. The phrase yeme chayyei hevlo ('the days of his vaporous life') makes hevel a modifier of life itself — life is vapor-like in its duration and substance. The shadow comparison (ka-tsel, 'like a shadow') adds a second image of insubstantiality.

7

Summary: *Chapter 7 is Qohelet's densest collection of proverbs, many of which sound like standard wisdom but are subtly subverted by their context. It opens with a series of 'better than' proverbs — a good name is better than fine oil, the day of death better than the day of birth, sorrow better than laughter. Qohelet then warns against nostalgia, anger, and the extremes of both righteousness and wickedness. The chapter's most controversial section comes in verses 23-29, where Qohelet reports his search for wisdom and his failure to find it, along with a troubling statement about finding something 'more bitter than death' — a woman whose heart is snares and nets.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The 'better than' proverbs in the opening verses systematically invert conventional expectations. A funeral is better than a feast. The end is better than the beginning. Sorrow is better than laughter. These are not nihilistic provocations but the fruit of Qohelet's investigation: knowing that life is vapor, the person who contemplates death honestly lives more wisely than the one who avoids the thought. The strangest passage is verse 16-17, where Qohelet warns against being excessively righteous or excessively wise, and equally against being excessively wicked. This 'golden mean' counsel is unique in the Hebrew Bible and has generated enormous debate — is Qohelet advising moral mediocrity? More likely, he is warning against the self-destructive forms of both piety (scrupulosity, spiritual burnout) and wickedness (reckless self-destruction).*

Translation Friction: *Verses 26-28 present the most difficult passage in Ecclesiastes for modern readers. Qohelet says he found 'one man among a thousand' but 'not one woman among all these.' The Hebrew is ambiguous and has been read in wildly different ways: as misogyny, as a comment on the specific women in Solomon's court, as a statement about the personified 'Woman Folly' of Proverbs 1-9, or as an acknowledgment of social structures that prevented women from receiving wisdom education. We render the text faithfully and address the complexity in the notes without either endorsing or sanitizing the statement.*

Connections: *The opening proverbs echo the form and style of Proverbs 10-31 but subvert their optimism. The 'don't say the former days were better' warning (v. 10) anticipates nostalgia as a perennial human temptation. The 'one man among a thousand' echoes Job 33:23 (an angel, 'one among a thousand'). The closing observation that 'God made humanity upright, but they have sought out many schemes' (v. 29) echoes Genesis 1-3, where God created humans good but they chose deviation.*

[1]A good name is better than fine perfume,
and the day of death better than the day of birth.

[2]Better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting,
for that is the end of every person,
and the living should take it to heart.

3Sorrow is better than laughter,
for a grieving face is good for the heart.

4The wise heart dwells in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

5Better to hear the rebuke of a wise person
than to listen to the song of fools.

6For like the crackling of thorns under a pot,
so is the laughter of the fool.
This too is vapor.

7For oppression can drive a wise person mad, and a bribe corrupts the heart.

8Better the end of a matter than its beginning;
better patience of spirit than pride of spirit.

9Do not be quick in your spirit to become angry,
for anger settles in the lap of fools.

10Do not say, 'Why were the former days better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. 11Wisdom is good with an inheritance, and an advantage for those who see the sun. 12For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, but the advantage of knowledge is this: wisdom preserves the life of its possessor. 13Consider the work of God: who can straighten what he has made crooked? 14On a good day, enjoy the good. On a bad day, reflect. God has made the one alongside the other so that no one can discover anything about what lies ahead. 15I have seen everything in my vaporous days: a righteous person perishing despite his righteousness, and a wicked person living long despite his wickedness. 16Do not be excessively righteous, and do not make yourself overly wise — why should you destroy yourself? 17Do not be excessively wicked, and do not be a fool — why should you die before your time? 18It is good to grasp the one without letting go of the other, for the person who fears God will navigate both. 19Wisdom strengthens the wise person more than ten rulers in a city. 20For there is no one on earth so righteous that he always does good and never misses the mark. 21Also, do not pay attention to everything people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you. 22For your own heart knows that you too have often cursed others. 23All this I tested by wisdom. I said, 'I will be wise,' but it was far from me. 24What exists is far off and deep — very deep. Who can find it? 25I turned — my mind and I — to understand, to investigate, and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to understand that wickedness is folly and that foolishness is madness. 26And I found something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. The one who pleases God will escape her, but the one who misses the mark will be captured by her. 27Look, this is what I found, says Qohelet, adding one thing to another to reach a conclusion: 28What my soul has sought continually I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I did not find. 29This alone I have found: God made human beings upright, but they have pursued many schemes.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The wordplay shem/shemen ('name/oil') is untranslatable but drives the first line. The second line shocks: the day of death (yom ha-mavet) is better than the day of birth (yom hivvaldo). This is not death-worship but a claim about completed reputation — at death, a life's meaning is sealed. At birth, everything is uncertain.

2. The bet evel ('house of mourning') confronts the visitor with mortality. The bet mishteh ('house of feasting') distracts from it. Qohelet's counsel is to choose the confrontation: sof kol ha-adam ('the end of every human') is a fact that the living (ha-chay) must internalize (yitten el libbo, 'place in his heart').

3. The word ka'as ('sorrow, vexation, grief') is the same word used negatively in 1:18. Here it functions positively: the grief that comes from facing reality honestly improves (yitav) the heart. The paradox is deliberate — what feels bad produces what is good.

4. The classification is sharp: where your heart gravitates reveals what you are. The wise are drawn to the place that teaches (the funeral), and fools to the place that entertains (the party). The word simchah ('joy, pleasure, mirth') is used positively elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, but here it describes the fool's preference for distraction.

5. The contrast between ga'arat chakham ('the rebuke of the wise') and shir kesilim ('the song of fools') sets painful truth against pleasant noise. The rebuke stings but teaches; the song entertains but teaches nothing.

6. The simile is both acoustic and substantive: thorns (sirim) burn hot and fast under a pot (sir) — the wordplay sirim/sir is intentional — producing noise and light but no lasting heat. The fool's laughter is the same: loud, bright, and gone in a moment.

7. Two threats to wisdom: osheq ('oppression, extortion') can make even a wise person holelel ('mad, senseless'), and a mattanah ('gift, bribe') can destroy (ye'abbed) the lev ('heart, mind'). Wisdom is not invulnerable — it can be broken by external pressure and corrupted by money.

8. Two 'better than' proverbs in a single verse. The first (acharit davar / reshito) values completion over initiation. The second (erekh ruach / govah ruach) values patience ('long spirit') over arrogance ('high spirit'). Both counsel endurance over impulse.

9. The verb bahel ('to be hasty') echoes 5:1. Quick anger (ka'as) finds a permanent home (yanuach, 'rests, settles') in the cheiq ('bosom, lap') of fools. The image is almost domestic: anger curls up in the fool's lap like a pet and stays.

10. Qohelet dismisses nostalgia as unwise (lo me-chokmah). The assumption that the past was superior to the present is not based on evidence but on selective memory. This connects to 1:11 — we do not remember the past accurately, so we idealize it.

11. Wisdom paired with nachalah ('inheritance, property') is the ideal combination — understanding plus resources. The phrase ro'e ha-shemesh ('those who see the sun') means 'the living' and echoes the 'under the sun' framework.

12. The word tsel ('shadow, shade, protection') applies equally to wisdom and money — both shelter a person. But wisdom has a yitron ('advantage') that money lacks: it techayeh ('gives life to, preserves the life of') its owner. This is the one context where Qohelet uses yitron positively.

13. The verse echoes 1:15 ('what is crooked cannot be straightened') but now identifies God as the one who made it crooked. This is a claim about divine sovereignty, not divine caprice — God has built certain frustrations into reality, and human beings cannot undo them.

14. The practical counsel: enjoy good days while they last and use bad days for reflection. The theological claim is that God made both (gam et zeh le-ummat zeh, 'this one opposite that one') deliberately, so that humans cannot predict the future (lo yimtsa ha-adam acharav me'umah, 'a person cannot find out anything about what comes after').

15. The observation flatly contradicts the retribution theology of Deuteronomy and Proverbs, where righteousness leads to long life and wickedness to destruction. Qohelet reports the opposite: the tsaddiq ('righteous one') perishes be-tsidqo ('in his righteousness') and the rasha ('wicked one') lives long be-ra'ato ('in his wickedness'). The phrase bime hevli ('in my vaporous days') makes his own life the laboratory.

16. The most controversial verse in Ecclesiastes. The warning against excessive righteousness (al tehi tsaddiq harbeh) does not endorse moral mediocrity. It warns against the self-destructive form of piety — legalistic scrupulosity, spiritual perfectionism, or the kind of rigid righteousness that breaks under the weight of an unjust world. The parallel warning against excessive wisdom reinforces this: both righteousness and wisdom, taken to extremes, can destroy (tishshomem, 'be desolated, be appalled, be destroyed') the one who pursues them.

17. The matching warning against excessive wickedness and foolishness. The phrase tamut be-lo ittekha ('die not in your time, die prematurely') suggests that reckless wickedness shortens life. Together with verse 16, the counsel is: neither rigid piety nor reckless wickedness — both paths lead to destruction.

18. The 'both/and' counsel: hold both warnings together. The phrase yere Elohim ('the one who fears God') introduces the only reliable guide through the tension — reverence for God enables a person to navigate between the extremes of rigid righteousness and reckless wickedness. The verb yetse et kullam ('will come out of/with all of them') means 'will navigate through, will emerge from all situations.'

19. The proverb affirms wisdom's practical power: it provides more protection (ta'oz, 'gives strength to') than ten shalliṭim ('rulers, officials, powerful men'). Even after all the qualifications of wisdom in this chapter, Qohelet still affirms its practical superiority.

20. A universal anthropological statement: no adam ('human being') is a tsaddiq ('righteous person') who only does good and never sins (yecheta, 'misses the mark'). This grounds the warning of verse 16 — since no one is perfectly righteous, claiming excessive righteousness is self-deception.

21. Practical wisdom: eavesdropping on every conversation will inevitably lead to hearing painful things. The servant cursing his master is a specific and humiliating example chosen for maximum impact.

22. The appeal to self-knowledge: your lev ('heart, mind') knows (yada) that you have done the same thing. The honesty is bracing — before being offended by your servant's words, remember your own.

23. The autobiographical report resumes. Qohelet tested (nissiti, 'tried, tested') everything by wisdom but found wisdom itself rechoqah ('distant, far away'). The irony is sharp: the tool of investigation eludes the investigator.

24. The doubled amoq amoq ('deep, deep') is a superlative — reality is unfathomably deep. The question mi yimtsa'ennu ('who can find it?') expects the answer: no one. The limits of wisdom are not just practical but ontological — reality itself is beyond reach.

25. The word cheshbon ('explanation, reckoning, accounting, scheme') is a key term that will return in verse 27 and 29. Qohelet seeks not just wisdom but the cheshbon — the underlying logic or calculus of how things work. The pairing of resha/kesel ('wickedness/folly') and sikhlut/holelot ('foolishness/madness') treats moral and intellectual failure as parallel.

26. This verse has been read in multiple ways. The 'woman' may refer to a specific seductress (a particular woman at court), to 'Woman Folly' personified in Proverbs 7 and 9:13-18, or to folly itself metaphorically figured as female. The imagery — metsodim ('hunting nets'), charamim ('fishing nets'), asurim ('bonds, chains') — is the language of entrapment, not of women in general. The tov lifne ha-Elohim ('the one good before God') escapes; the choteh ('one who misses the mark') is caught. The moral framework suggests this is about a specific type of dangerous entanglement rather than a blanket statement about women.

27. The phrase achat le-achat ('one to one') describes a methodical process of accumulating observations. The word cheshbon ('conclusion, reckoning, sum') is the result of the calculation. The feminine form amarah qohelet ('said Qohelet') is unusual and may reflect the feminine grammatical form of the title qohelet.

28. The most debated verse in Ecclesiastes. The 'one man among a thousand' may echo Job 33:23, where an angelic mediator is 'one among a thousand.' If Qohelet is saying he found one genuinely wise person among a thousand men and none among women, the statement reflects the social reality that women in the ancient Near East were largely excluded from wisdom schools and philosophical education — it says more about access than about capacity. Alternatively, the verse may continue the allegory of verse 26: the 'woman' is personified Folly, and no manifestation of her has led to wisdom. Both readings have ancient support.

29. The chapter's conclusion is a creation-and-fall summary. God made ha-adam ('the human being, humanity') yashar ('straight, upright'), but hemmah ('they') sought out chishbonot rabbim ('many calculations, many schemes, many inventions'). The word chishbonot is the plural of cheshbon from verses 25 and 27 — the very accounting Qohelet has been pursuing is part of humanity's deviation from original simplicity. The irony is self-aware: the search for understanding is itself evidence of the fall from uprightness.

8

Summary: *Chapter 8 navigates the treacherous world of royal courts and divine justice. Qohelet opens with advice on surviving under authoritarian power: obey the king, do not rush from his presence, and remember that he has the power to do as he pleases. From political power, the chapter moves to a meditation on death as the one power no human can control — no one has authority over the day of death, and no one is discharged from that war. Qohelet then confronts the failure of retribution theology: the wicked receive the reward of the righteous, and the righteous receive the fate of the wicked. Despite this, the chapter delivers another enjoyment commendation and closes with a humble acknowledgment that no one can discover what God is doing under the sun.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This chapter contains the starkest statement of moral inversion in the book: 'there are righteous people who receive what the wicked deserve, and wicked people who receive what the righteous deserve' (v. 14). This is not theoretical — Qohelet says yesh ('there exists, there are'), indicating observed reality. The enjoyment passage (v. 15) follows immediately after this moral chaos, which makes it something other than naive optimism. It is counsel given in full knowledge of the world's injustice: precisely because the moral order is unreliable, present joy should not be refused.*

Translation Friction: *Verses 12-13 appear to affirm traditional retribution theology ('it will be well with those who fear God...it will not be well with the wicked'), but verse 14 immediately undermines this with observed counterexamples. Whether verses 12-13 represent Qohelet quoting and then critiquing conventional wisdom, or genuinely affirming it before qualifying it, is debated. The tension may be intentional — Qohelet holds both the theological ideal and the empirical reality without resolving the contradiction.*

Connections: *The king-and-court section connects to Proverbs 16:14-15; 19:12; 25:1-7, which also offer survival wisdom for courtiers. The 'no authority over the day of death' passage echoes Psalm 49:7-9 ('no one can redeem the life of another'). The moral inversion observation connects to the broader ancient Near Eastern theodicy tradition, especially the Babylonian Theodicy and Ludlul bel nemeqi ('I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom'). The enjoyment passage (v. 15) is the fifth of seven.*

1Who is like the wise person? Who knows the interpretation of a matter? A person's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is transformed. 2I say: obey the king's command, especially because of the oath sworn before God. 3Do not rush from his presence, and do not persist in a bad cause, for he does whatever he pleases. 4Since a king's word has authority, who can say to him, 'What are you doing?' 5The one who keeps the command will encounter no harm, and the wise heart knows the right time and the right procedure. 6For there is a time and a procedure for every matter, though the burden of trouble weighs heavily on a person. 7Since no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will occur? 8N o one has power over the wind to contain the wind, and no one has authority over the day of death. There is no discharge in that war, and wickedness will not save those who practice it. 9All this I have seen while applying my mind to everything done under the sun — a time when one person has power over another to his harm. 10I also saw the wicked buried — they used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the very city where they had acted wickedly. This too is vapor. 11Because the sentence against an evil deed is not carried out swiftly, the hearts of human beings are emboldened to do wrong. 12Thoug h a sinner does wrong a hundred times and still lives long, yet I also know that it will go well with those who fear God, who are reverent before him. 13But it will not go well with the wicked, and he will not prolong his days, which pass like a shadow, because he does not fear God. 14There is a vapor that occurs on earth: there are righteous people who receive what the wicked deserve, and there are wicked people who receive what the righteous deserve. I said that this too is vapor. 15So I commend joy, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. This will accompany him in his toil through the days of his life that God gives him under the sun. 16When I set my mind to know wisdom and to observe the business that is done on earth — for neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep — 17I saw all that God has done: no one can discover what is happening under the sun. However much a person toils to seek it out, he will not find it. Even if the wise person claims to know, he cannot find it.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The word pesher ('interpretation, solution') is a Persian/Aramaic loanword found elsewhere only in Daniel. Its presence here is another marker of the book's late date. Wisdom's effect on the face is both metaphorical and observable: understanding transforms a hard expression (oz panav, 'strength/hardness of his face') into one of illumination.

2. The phrase shevuat Elohim ('the oath of God') likely refers to a loyalty oath sworn by subjects to the king. Qohelet's counsel is not blind obedience but recognizes that oath-breaking before God has consequences (see 5:3-5). The political context is a court where disobedience can be fatal.

3. Two pieces of court survival advice: do not leave the king's presence in haste (it signals guilt or disloyalty), and do not stubbornly pursue a matter that displeases him. The reason — kol asher yachpots ya'aseh ('he does whatever he desires') — is a statement of raw power, not endorsement.

4. The word shilton ('authority, power, dominion') is another Aramaic loanword. The rhetorical question ('who can say to him?') echoes the language used of God in Job 9:12 and Daniel 4:35 — Qohelet draws a parallel between royal and divine power, both of which operate beyond human challenge.

5. The mitsvah ('command') here is the king's command, not God's commandments. The wise courtier knows et u-mishpat ('time and procedure') — when to act and how to act. This is practical court wisdom: timing is everything.

6. The et u-mishpat ('time and procedure') from the previous verse is now universalized: every matter has its appropriate time and method. But the ki ra'at ha-adam rabbah alav ('for the trouble of the person is great upon him') introduces a heavy qualifier — knowing the right time does not remove the weight of human suffering.

7. The double uncertainty: what (mah she-yihyeh) and when (ka-asher yihyeh). Even the wise courtier who knows 'time and procedure' cannot know the future. Human ignorance of coming events is one of Qohelet's most persistent themes.

8. The fourfold 'no one / nothing' structure (ein…ein…ein…lo) creates a wall of negation. Every avenue of escape — control, authority, military discharge, moral cunning — is closed. Death is the absolute limit of human power.

9. The phrase shalat ha-adam be-adam le-ra lo ('one person rules over another to his harm') is ambiguous: 'to his harm' could refer to the ruler or the ruled. Both readings work — the exercise of domination damages the oppressor as well as the oppressed.

10. The textual difficulties in this verse are considerable (the Hebrew is unclear in several places), but the general sense is preserved: wicked people who frequented the temple (maqom qadosh, 'holy place') received honorable burial and were praised despite their wickedness. The injustice of public reputation contradicting actual character is the hevel being observed.

11. The word pitgam ('sentence, decree, edict') is a Persian loanword (from Old Persian patigama). The psychological observation is acute: delayed punishment encourages continued evil. When consequences are not immediate, people conclude they are absent. The verb male ('is filled') suggests the heart fills up with boldness to do evil, as though moral restraint drains away in the absence of enforcement.

12. Qohelet affirms the traditional view: yihyeh tov le-yir'e ha-Elohim ('it will be good for those who fear God'). Whether this is his own conviction or a quotation of conventional wisdom that he will immediately qualify (see v. 14) is debated. The gam yodea ani ('I also know') may be concessive — 'I know this is supposed to be true.'

13. The conventional retribution formula continues: the rasha ('wicked person') will not prosper, and his days are ka-tsel ('like a shadow') — insubstantial and fleeting. The absence of fear of God (einennu yare mi-lifne Elohim) is identified as the cause. This verse represents the theological ideal that the next verse will challenge.

14. The observed reality contradicts verses 12-13. Righteous people (tsaddiqim) receive ke-ma'aseh ha-resha'im ('according to the deeds of the wicked') — they suffer as though they were evil. Wicked people (resha'im) receive ke-ma'aseh ha-tsaddiqim ('according to the deeds of the righteous') — they prosper as though they were good. The moral order is inverted. Qohelet does not resolve this contradiction; he labels it hevel.

15. The fifth enjoyment passage arrives immediately after the starkest observation of moral disorder. The logic is: since the moral order cannot be relied upon to reward the righteous, present joy should be received whenever it appears. The verb yilvenu ('will accompany him') makes joy a traveling companion through the labor of life — not a destination but a presence along the way.

16. The autobiographical report: Qohelet's investigation was so consuming that it cost him sleep (shenah be-einav einennu ro'eh, 'sleep with his eyes he does not see'). The sleeplessness echoes the rich man's insomnia in 5:11, but here it is driven by intellectual inquiry rather than financial anxiety.

17. The chapter's conclusion is a threefold declaration of human epistemic failure: the person who labors to understand (ya'amol le-vaqqesh) will not find it (lo yimtsa); and even the wise person (he-chakham) who claims to know (yomar la-da'at) cannot find it (lo yukhal limtso). The repetition of lo yimtsa ('will not find') three times in various forms makes the point unescapable. Wisdom's limit is God's work.

9

Summary: *Chapter 9 delivers Qohelet's most sustained meditation on death as the great equalizer. The righteous and the wicked, the clean and the unclean, the one who sacrifices and the one who does not — all share the same fate. This is the ultimate evil under the sun: one destiny for everyone. From this grim foundation, Qohelet launches the most passionate enjoyment passage in the book (vv. 7-10): go, eat your bread with joy, drink your wine with a glad heart, enjoy life with the woman you love, and work with all your strength — because the grave awaits, and there is no work, planning, knowledge, or wisdom there. The chapter then turns to the theme of time and chance, arguing that the race does not always go to the swift, and closes with a parable about a poor wise man who saved a city but was forgotten.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The enjoyment passage in verses 7-10 is the emotional peak of the entire book. After eleven chapters of relentless analysis, Qohelet speaks with urgent imperative verbs: lekh ('go!'), ekhol ('eat!'), shete ('drink!'), re'eh chayyim ('see/enjoy life!'). The switch from observational third person to commanding second person is electrifying. These are not suggestions — they are orders. And the ground for the orders is not optimism but mortality: 'there is no work or planning or knowledge or wisdom in the grave, where you are going' (v. 10). The call to joy is underwritten by the certainty of death. This is not carpe diem in the shallow sense; it is the urgent voice of someone who has stared into the void and returned with one instruction: receive what is given, now, fully.*

Translation Friction: *The statement 'the dead know nothing' (v. 5) and 'there is no work or planning or knowledge or wisdom in the grave' (v. 10) are among the most debated in the Hebrew Bible regarding the afterlife. Qohelet appears to deny any meaningful post-mortem existence. Whether this reflects Qohelet's personal conviction, the limits of his 'under the sun' methodology (which by definition cannot examine what lies beyond death), or a rhetorical device to motivate present engagement is vigorously debated. We render the text as written without importing later theological developments.*

Connections: *The enjoyment passage closely parallels the advice of Siduri to Gilgamesh in the Old Babylonian version of the Epic of Gilgamesh: 'Let your belly be full, day and night make merry, let your garments be sparkling fresh, bathe in water, gaze upon the child who holds your hand, let a wife delight in your embrace.' Whether Qohelet knew this tradition directly or both drew from a common ancient Near Eastern topos is uncertain. The 'time and chance' section (v. 11) connects to 3:1-8 but adds the element of randomness (pega, 'chance, accident') that the earlier poem did not include. The parable of the poor wise man (vv. 13-18) connects to 4:13-16.*

1I took all this to heart and examined it all: the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in God's hand. Whether it will be
love or hatred, no one knows. Everything lies before them. 2Everything is the same for everyone: one fate for the righteous
and the wicked, for the good and the clean and the unclean, for the one who sacrifices and the one who does not sacrifice. As
it is for the good person, so for the sinner; for the one who swears oaths as for the one who fears to swear. 3This is the evil in
everything done under the sun: there is one fate for everyone, and the hearts of human beings are full of evil, and madness
fills their hearts during their lives — and after that, they go to the dead. 4For whoever is among the living has hope. A living
dog is better than a dead lion. 5For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing. They have no further
reward, for even the memory of them is forgotten. 6Their love, their hatred, and their passion have already perished. They
have no further share, ever, in anything done under the sun. 7Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a glad
heart, for God has already approved what you do.

8Let your garments always be white,
and let oil never be lacking on your head.

9Enjoy life with the woman you love through all the days of your vaporous life that God has given you under the sun — all
your vaporous days. For this is your portion in life and in the toil at which you work under the sun. 10Whatever your hand
finds to do, do it with all your strength, for there is no work, no planning, no knowledge, and no wisdom in the grave where
you are going. 11Again I saw under the sun that the race does not belong to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to
the wise, nor wealth to the intelligent, nor favor to the knowledgeable — for time and chance overtake them all. 12For a
person does not know his time: like fish caught in a cruel net, like birds trapped in a snare, so human beings are trapped by a
time of disaster when it falls upon them suddenly. 13I also observed this example of wisdom under the sun, and it struck me
as significant: 14There was a small city with few people in it. A great king came against it, besieged it, and built massive siege
works against it. 15But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he saved the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered
that poor man. 16So I said, 'Wisdom is better than strength.' Yet the wisdom of the poor is despised, and his words are not
heard. 17The quiet words of the wise are heard above the shouting of a ruler among fools. 18Wisdom is better than weapons of
war, but one person who misses the mark can destroy much good.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The phrase be-yad ha-Elohim ('in the hand of God') could be comforting or unsettling — it means the righteous have no more control over their fate than anyone else. God holds them, but they cannot predict whether what comes will be ahavah ('love') or sin'ah ('hatred'). The ambiguity is the point.
2. The list of moral and religious categories covers every conceivable distinction: righteous/wicked, good/clean/unclean, sacrificing/non-sacrificing, oath-taker/oath-fearer. Every pair shares miqreh echad ('one fate'). The comprehensiveness is deliberate — no moral or ritual distinction exempts anyone from the common destiny of death.
3. Qohelet identifies the shared fate of death as the ra ('evil, trouble') in the system. Its consequence is moral: knowing that everyone ends the same way, human hearts fill with ra ('evil') and holelot ('madness'). If no moral distinction matters in the end, the incentive to behave well weakens. The grim sequence is: evil hearts, madness during life, death after.
4. The proverb is darkly humorous. The dog (kelev) was the most despised animal in ancient Israel, and the lion (aryeh) the most noble. Yet a living dog outranks a dead lion — not because life is glorious but because the living still have bittachon ('hope, confidence, something to trust in'). Even despised existence outperforms noble death.
5. The living have one piece of knowledge (she-yamutu, 'that they will die'), and this awareness — however grim — is an advantage. The dead have nothing: ein yod'im me'umah ('they know nothing at all'), ein od lahem sakhar ('there is no further reward for them'), and nishkach zikhram ('their memory is forgotten'). This triple negation is Qohelet's starkest statement about death.
6. Three human drives — ahavah ('love'), sin'ah ('hatred'), qin'ah ('passion, jealousy, zeal') — all cease at death (kevar avdah, 'have already perished'). The word cheleq ('share, portion') returns: the dead have no portion le-olam ('forever') in anything under the sun. This is the ground from which the enjoyment passage launches.
7. The imperative verbs begin: lekh ('go!'), ekhol ('eat!'), shete ('drink!'). The phrase ki kevar ratsah ha-Elohim et ma'asekha ('for God has already approved your deeds') is either an assurance of divine favor or a liberation from anxious performance — God's approval precedes rather than follows your enjoyment. The 'already' (kevar) removes the condition: do not wait for permission; it has been given.

8. White garments (begadim levanim) signify festivity and celebration — these are not workday clothes but feast-day clothes. Oil (shemen) on the head is the mark of honored guests at banquets. Qohelet is saying: live every day as though you are at a feast. Do not dress for mourning; dress for joy.

9. The phrase re'eh chayyim ('see life, enjoy life, experience life') is the command to be fully present with the person you love. The repetition of kol yeme hevlekha ('all the days of your vapor') twice in the same verse underscores the urgency: the window is brief. Cheleq ('portion') returns as the word for what life actually offers — not permanent gain, but this: love, companionship, shared toil, shared days.

10. She'ol is the Hebrew underworld — not hell in the later Christian sense, but the shadowy realm of the dead where all go regardless of moral standing. Qohelet's description of it as a place of zero activity, planning, knowledge, and wisdom is consistent with other Hebrew Bible depictions (Psalm 6:5; 88:10-12; Isaiah 38:18). The passage is not making a theological statement about the afterlife but grounding the call to present action in the reality of death.

11. Five conventional expectations are denied: speed does not guarantee winning the race, strength the battle, wisdom bread, intelligence wealth, or knowledge favor. The reason is et va-fega ('time and chance'). The word pega ('chance, accident, occurrence') introduces randomness into a wisdom tradition that typically assumes ordered outcomes. Qohelet is not saying effort is useless but that it does not guarantee results.

12. The images of the netted fish and snared bird convey helplessness and surprise. The word pit'om ('suddenly') makes the point: disaster is not gradual but instantaneous. The phrase et ra'ah ('an evil time, a time of disaster') is the time of death or catastrophe that arrives without warning.

13. The introduction to the parable. The phrase gedolah hi elai ('it was great to me, it struck me as significant') signals that what follows is not just an anecdote but a case study of deep import.

14. The parable is told with fairy-tale economy: a small city (ir qetannah), few people (anashim bah me'at), and a great king (melekh gadol) with siege works (metsodim gedolim). The disproportion between attacker and defender sets up the surprise of verse 15.

15. The poor wise man (ish misken chakham) delivers the city through wisdom — not military force. But the outcome is tragically predictable: ve-adam lo zakhar et ha-ish ha-misken ha-hu ('and no one remembered that poor man'). Wisdom saves, and wisdom is forgotten. The parable encapsulates the entire book's tension: wisdom is genuinely valuable (it saved the city) and genuinely unrewarded (it earned no lasting recognition).

16. The 'better than' proverb (wisdom > strength) is immediately undercut: the poor man's wisdom is bezuyah ('despised, held in contempt') and his words einam nishma'im ('are not heard, are not listened to'). Wisdom's theoretical superiority does not translate into social recognition. The poor wise man wins the battle but loses the narrative.

17. A contrast in volume: the wise speak be-nachat ('in quiet, in tranquility'), while the ruler among fools za'aqat ('shouts, cries out'). True authority speaks softly; false authority compensates with volume. Whether this is an ideal or an observed reality is left ambiguous.

18. The chapter closes with a double-edged proverb. Wisdom outperforms military hardware (kele qerav, 'weapons of battle'). But a single choteh echad ('one person who misses the mark') can ye'abbed tovah harbeh ('destroy much good'). The asymmetry is the point: building wisdom takes long effort; destroying its fruits takes one fool.

10

Summary: *Chapter 10 is a loose collection of proverbs on wisdom and folly, with particular attention to political life and the dangers of foolish leadership. Dead flies spoil fine perfume; a little folly outweighs wisdom. The fool's heart leads him astray, and his words multiply recklessly. Qohelet observes a world turned upside down — servants on horseback and princes walking on foot. He offers practical wisdom about the risks of work (the one who digs a pit may fall in, the one who breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake), the advantage of skill, and the catastrophic danger of careless speech — especially about the king.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This chapter reads most like conventional Proverbs-style wisdom, yet even here Qohelet's distinctive voice surfaces. The 'dead flies' proverb (v. 1) encapsulates a core theme: a small amount of folly can ruin a large investment in wisdom, just as a few dead insects ruin an entire batch of perfume. The disproportion between cause and effect is the point — the system is fragile. The political observations (vv. 5-7, 16-17, 20) reveal Qohelet's awareness of court intrigue and his concern with the disproportionate damage that foolish rulers inflict. The snake-in-the-wall proverb (v. 8) and the chapter's general tone of 'everything can go wrong' create an atmosphere of low-grade anxiety that characterizes life under conditions of uncertainty.*

Translation Friction: *The chapter's proverbial style makes it difficult to identify a coherent argument. Some scholars treat it as a miscellany of traditional sayings loosely organized by theme; others find a subtle progression from individual folly (vv. 1-3) to political folly (vv. 4-7) to occupational folly (vv. 8-11) to verbal folly (vv. 12-15) to national folly (vv. 16-20). The organization is looser than preceding chapters, and the connection to Qohelet's larger argument about hevel is less explicit. The chapter may represent a deliberate shift to*

practical advice after the existential intensity of chapters 8-9.

Connections: *The 'dead flies' proverb connects to the perfume/name wordplay of 7:1. The 'fool on the road' image (v. 3) echoes Proverbs 12:23; 13:16; 14:33. The political observations parallel Proverbs 30:21-23 (the earth trembles under a servant who becomes king). The 'do not curse the king even in your thoughts' warning (v. 20) anticipates the court wisdom of Daniel and Esther.*

1 Dead flies make the perfumer's oil stink and ferment.
So a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

2 The wise person's heart inclines to the right,
but the fool's heart to the left.

3 Even on the road, when a fool walks along, his sense is lacking, and he announces to everyone that he is a fool. 4 If the anger of a ruler rises against you, do not leave your post, for calmness can defuse great offenses. 5 There is an evil I have seen under the sun — a kind of error that comes from those in power: 6 Fools are placed in many high positions, while the capable sit in low ones. 7 I have seen servants on horseback, and princes walking on foot like servants.

8 The one who digs a pit may fall into it,
and the one who breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake.

9 The one who quarries stones may be injured by them,
and the one who splits logs may be endangered by them.

10 If the iron tool is dull and its edge is not sharpened, then more force is needed. But wisdom brings success through skill. 11 I f a snake bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage for the snake charmer.

12 The words from a wise person's mouth are gracious,
but a fool's lips consume him.

13 The beginning of his speech is foolishness, and the end of his talk is wicked madness. 14 The fool multiplies words, though no one knows what will happen — and who can tell him what will come after? 15 The toil of fools wears them out — they do not even know the way to town.

16 Woe to you, O land, whose king is a youth,
and whose officials feast in the morning!

17 Happy are you, O land, whose king is of noble birth,
and whose officials eat at the proper time — for strength and not for drunkenness!

18 Through laziness the roof sags,
and through idle hands the house leaks.

19 A feast is prepared for laughter, wine makes life merry, and money meets every need.

20 Do not curse the king even in your thoughts,
and do not curse the wealthy in your bedroom,
for a bird of the sky may carry your voice,
and a winged creature may report what you said.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The proverb's logic: it takes many ingredients and much skill to produce fine perfume (shemen roqeach, 'oil of the perfumer'), but a few dead flies (zevuve mavet, literally 'flies of death') ruin the entire batch. The application: sikhlut me'at ('a little folly') can destroy the accumulated capital of wisdom and honor. The disproportion between the small cause and the large effect is the warning.

2. Right (yamin) and left (semol) carry symbolic weight: right is the side of favor, strength, and skill; left is the side of weakness and misfortune. The proverb is about instinctive direction — the wise and the fool gravitate toward opposite poles without deliberation.

3. The fool's foolishness is self-advertising. The phrase libbo chaser ('his heart lacks') means his mind is deficient in every context — not just in formal settings but ba-derekh ('on the road'), in ordinary life. The verb amar ('he says') may mean he literally announces foolish things or, more likely, his behavior proclaims his foolishness to all observers.

4. Court survival advice. When the moshel ('ruler, authority') becomes angry (ruach...ta'aleh, 'his spirit rises'), the courtier should not flee (al tannach meqomekha, 'do not abandon your place'). Instead, marpe ('calmness, gentleness, healing') can yaniach ('set at rest, pacify') even chatayim gedolim ('great offenses'). Composure under pressure is more effective than panic.

5. The word shegagah ('error, inadvertent mistake') is used for unintentional sin in Leviticus 4-5 and Numbers 15. Here it describes a ruler's blunder — perhaps an appointment made carelessly. The consequences of a ruler's 'error' are public and systemic.

6. The sekhel ('fool, folly') occupies ba-meromim rabbim ('in many high places'), while the ashirim ('wealthy, capable') sit ba-shefel ('in the low place'). The inversion of the social order — incompetence elevated, competence demoted — is the 'error' identified in verse 5.

7. The image is vivid: horses signify status, and walking signifies servitude. The inversion — servants riding, princes walking — summarizes the political disorder of verses 5-6 in a single snapshot.

8. Two proverbs about the hidden dangers of work. The pit-digger risks falling in; the wall-breaker disturbs a snake nesting in the stones. Both illustrate the unpredictability of consequences — even productive labor carries hidden risks. The proverbs may also carry moral overtones: the one who sets a trap may be caught in it.

9. The occupational hazard proverbs continue: quarrying and woodcutting are both dangerous trades. The verbs ye'atsev ('may be pained, injured') and yissaken ('may be endangered') acknowledge that productive work carries inherent risk. No occupation is safe.

10. A proverb about preparation versus brute force. A dull blade (qehah ha-barzel) requires more strength (chayalim yegabber) to use. But yitron hakhsher chokmah ('the advantage of skill is wisdom') — wisdom sharpens the approach so that less force is needed. This is one of the few places where yitron ('advantage') is used positively.

11. The proverb connects to verse 8 (the snake in the wall) and applies to timing: if the nachash ('snake') bites be-lo lachash ('before the incantation, without charming'), the ba'al ha-lashon ('master of the tongue,' i.e., the snake charmer) has no advantage. Skill that comes too late is no skill at all. The proverb may also apply to speech: the person with eloquence (ba'al ha-lashon) who speaks too late gains nothing.

12. The contrast: the wise person's words are chen ('grace, favor'), while the fool's lips tevalle'ennu ('swallow him, consume him'). The fool's speech is self-destructive — his own words devour him.

13. The fool's speech deteriorates: it begins as sikhlut ('foolishness') and ends as holelut ra'ah ('wicked madness'). Folly does not stay at the same level — it escalates.

14. The fool's verbosity contrasts with his ignorance: he yarbeh devarim ('multiplies words') while knowing nothing about the future. The juxtaposition is ironic — the person who talks most knows least.

15. The image is comically sharp: the fool works himself to exhaustion (teyagge'ennu, 'wearies him') because he cannot find the way to the city — presumably the most basic navigational task. Incompetence makes even simple tasks exhausting.

16. The na'ar ('youth, boy, servant') king lacks maturity and experience. The officials who feast ba-boqer ('in the morning') are indulging when they should be governing. The woe (i lakh, 'alas for you') is addressed to the entire erets ('land, nation'), which suffers from its leaders' immaturity and self-indulgence.

17. The contrast: ashreikh ('happy are you, fortunate are you') for the land whose king is ben chorim ('a son of free-born nobles') and whose officials eat ba-et ('at the proper time') for gevurah ('strength, sustenance') and not for sheti ('drinking, drunkenness'). Discipline in leadership translates to national well-being.

18. The proverb uses architectural decay as a metaphor for national decline under lazy leadership. The meqareh ('roofing, rafters') sinks (yimmakh), and the bayit ('house') leaks (yidlof). Neglect produces slow, structural collapse.

19. A sardonic observation: lechem ('bread, a feast') is made for laughter, yayin ('wine') for joy, and kessef ('money') ya'aneh et ha-kol ('answers everything'). Whether this is Qohelet's own view or his wry description of the officials' philosophy from verses 16-19 is debated. The statement about money is ambiguous — it could be cynical or simply realistic.

20. The chapter closes with a warning about the dangerous reach of speech. Even in maddaakha ('your mind, your knowledge, your private thoughts') and chadre mishkavekha ('the rooms of your bed, your most private space'), words are not safe. The proverbial 'a little bird told me' (of ha-shamayim yolik et ha-qol, 'a bird of the heavens will carry the voice') captures the reality that in a court culture, nothing stays secret. Surveillance is everywhere.

11

Summary: *Chapter 11 marks the book's turn from analysis to exhortation. Qohelet moves from describing the world's vapor to prescribing how to live within it. Cast your bread upon the waters. Diversify your investments. Do not wait for perfect conditions to act. You cannot predict which ventures will succeed, any more than you can understand how a child forms in the womb. The chapter builds to the seventh and final enjoyment passage (vv. 7-10): light is sweet, the living should rejoice in all their years, the young person should follow his heart and the sight of his eyes — but remember that God will bring all of it to account. Youth itself is vapor.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The shift in tone from chapters 1-10 to chapter 11 is dramatic. Where the earlier chapters observed and analyzed, chapter 11 commands: shalach ('send out!'), ten ('give!'), zera ('sow!'), simchah ('rejoice!'), halokh ('walk!'). Qohelet has finished his investigation and is now issuing his final instructions. The counsel to 'cast your bread upon the waters' (v. 1) has been interpreted as commercial advice (invest in overseas trade), charitable counsel (give generously, and it will return to you), or existential strategy (release your grip on outcomes). All three readings are valid and may be simultaneously intended. The final enjoyment passage (vv. 7-10) is addressed specifically to the young — the bachur ('young man') — and carries a unique urgency: youth passes quickly, and the body's decline is coming (as chapter 12 will make devastatingly clear).*

Translation Friction: *Verse 9 contains a startling statement: 'follow your heart and the sight of your eyes.' This directly contradicts Numbers 15:39, which warns against following your heart and eyes. Qohelet either deliberately inverts the Torah command or operates in a different register — his 'follow your heart' is qualified by 'know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.' The freedom is genuine, but so is the accountability. This tension between liberty and judgment is left unresolved and is, perhaps, the book's final wisdom.*

Connections: *The 'cast your bread upon the waters' image has parallels in Egyptian wisdom literature (the Instruction of Ankhsheshonq: 'Do a good deed and throw it in the water'). The 'you do not know which will succeed' counsel connects to 3:11 ('no one can discover what God has done') and 9:11 ('time and chance overtake them all'). The rejoicing-of-youth passage leads directly into the aging poem of 12:1-7 — the two sections form a single unit moving from vigor to decline.*

1 Send your bread out upon the waters,
for after many days you will find it again.

2 Divide your portion among seven, or even eight,
for you do not know what disaster may strike the land.

3 When the clouds are full, they pour rain on the earth.
If a tree falls to the south or to the north,
wherever the tree falls, there it will lie.

4 The one who watches the wind will never sow,
and the one who watches the clouds will never reap.

5 Just as you do not know the path of the wind, or how bones form in the womb of a pregnant woman, so you cannot know the work of God who makes everything. 6 Sow your seed in the morning, and do not let your hand rest in the evening, for you do not know which will succeed — this one or that one — or whether both will turn out equally well.

7 Light is sweet,
and it is good for the eyes to see the sun.

8 Even if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in all of them, but let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything that comes is vapor.

9 Rejoice, young person, in your youth!
Let your heart bring you joy in the days of your vigor.
Follow the ways of your heart
and the sight of your eyes —
but know that for all these things God will bring you to account.

10 Remove vexation from your heart
and banish pain from your body,
for youth and the dawn of life are vapor.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The word lechem ('bread') may be literal (grain shipped by sea) or metaphorical (resources, effort, generosity). The advice fits Qohelet's worldview: since you cannot predict outcomes (9:11) or control God's timing (3:1-8), the best strategy is broad, generous release of effort across many ventures.
2. The numerical progression 'seven...even eight' is a standard Hebrew poetic device (compare Amos 1:3, 'for three transgressions...for four'). The counsel is diversification: spread your resources across many ventures because you cannot predict what ra'ah ('disaster, evil, trouble') may come. This is not pessimism but prudent risk management in an uncertain world.
3. Two observations about natural inevitability. Full clouds must rain — they have no choice. A fallen tree lies wherever it fell — it cannot be unfallen. The point: some things are beyond human control. Once certain conditions are met, outcomes follow mechanically. Do not waste time wishing clouds would not rain or fallen trees would rise.
4. A warning against paralysis by analysis. The farmer who waits for perfect wind conditions (shomer ruach) will never plant, and the one who watches for perfect weather (ro'eh be-avim) will never harvest. Since conditions are never ideal and the future is unpredictable, the only option is to act despite uncertainty. This is Qohelet's antidote to the paralysis that his own philosophy might induce.
5. Two mysteries stand for all mysteries: the derekh ha-ruach ('the path of the wind/spirit') and the formation of atsamin ('bones') be-veten ha-mele'ah ('in the full/pregnant womb'). Both are real processes that proceed invisibly and beyond human comprehension. From these Qohelet draws the analogy: ma'aseh ha-Elohim ('the work of God') is equally unknowable. The word ruach again carries its double meaning — 'wind' and 'spirit/breath' — and the ambiguity is productive: you know neither the wind's path nor the life-breath's origin.
6. The practical application of verses 1-5: since the future is unpredictable, sow at both ends of the day. The word yikshar ('will succeed, will prosper') from the root kasher ('to be right, to succeed') is the basis of the modern word 'kosher.' The ignorance about which effort will bear fruit is liberating, not paralyzing: try everything, because you cannot know in advance what will work.
7. The final enjoyment passage begins with a simple sensory affirmation: light (or) is matok ('sweet'), and seeing the sun (shemesh) is tov ('good'). After all the analysis, Qohelet returns to the most basic human experience — the pleasure of light. This is not philosophical argument but bodily testimony.
8. The counsel to rejoice is paired with the command to remember: yeme ha-choshekh ('the days of darkness') — whether this means old age, death, or the grave — will be many (harbeh). Joy and mortality awareness are not contradictory but complementary. The final clause, kol she-ba havel ('everything that comes is vapor'), applies the thesis to the future itself: what is ahead is as vaporous as what is behind.
9. The address shifts to the bachur ('young man, young person'). The imperatives are exuberant: simchah ('rejoice!'), yitivkha libbekha ('let your heart do you good!'), halekh be-darkhe libbekha ('walk in the ways of your heart!'). The phrase u-ve-mar'e einekha ('and in the sight of your eyes') appears to contradict Numbers 15:39 ('do not follow after your heart and your eyes'). Qohelet's context, however, adds the qualifier: da ki al kol elleh yevi'akha ha-Elohim ba-mishpat ('know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment'). Freedom and accountability coexist. Enjoy fully, but not recklessly.
10. Two commands: remove ka'as ('vexation, anger, grief') from the heart, and remove ra'ah ('evil, pain, trouble') from the flesh. Qohelet addresses the whole person — inner and outer. The closing declaration, ki ha-yaldut ve-ha-shacharut havel ('for youth and the dawn of life are vapor'), is bittersweet. The word shacharut ('dawn, dark hair, the time of dark/youthful hair') appears only here in the Hebrew Bible. Youth is precious precisely because it is vapor — it is already passing as you experience it. This sets up the aging poem of chapter 12.

12

Summary: *The final chapter of Ecclesiastes contains three distinct sections. First, the great aging allegory (vv. 1-7): a sustained poetic description of the body's decline, rendered through metaphors of a darkening sky, trembling guards, grinding women who cease, and a house falling into disrepair, climaxing with the golden bowl shattered and the spirit returning to the God who gave it. Second, the return of the thesis (v. 8): 'Vapor of vapors, says Qohelet — everything is vapor.' Third, the epilogue (vv. 9-14), written by an editor who commends Qohelet's work but adds the book's final word: fear God and keep his commandments, for God will bring every deed into judgment.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The aging allegory in verses 1-7 is the most sustained and elaborate metaphorical poem in the Hebrew Bible's wisdom literature. Every image corresponds to an aspect of bodily decline: the 'guards of the house' are the arms, the 'strong men' are the legs, the 'grinding women' are the teeth, the 'windows' are the eyes. The poem moves from external observation (the darkening sky, the trembling house) to internal collapse (the silver cord snapped, the golden bowl shattered) and finally to cosmic dissolution (the dust returns to the earth, the spirit returns to God). The progression from 11:9's 'rejoice, young person!' to 12:1's 'remember your Creator' to 12:7's 'the dust returns to the earth' is one of the most powerful emotional arcs in ancient literature — a single, unbroken movement from joy to memory to decay to death to God. The epilogue (vv. 9-14) shifts to third person and appears to be a student or editor's addition. It frames the entire book as instruction and adds the theological anchor that Qohelet himself never quite states: fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of every person.*

Translation Friction: *The aging allegory's metaphors are widely agreed upon in their general referents but debated in specifics. Is the 'almond tree' (v. 5) the white-haired head, or the blossoming of spring that the old person cannot enjoy? Is the 'grasshopper' that 'drags itself along' a symbol of the old person's gait, or a reference to the loss of sexual desire (since chagav, 'grasshopper/locust,' was associated with fertility in some ancient traditions)? The epilogue's theological conservatism (v. 13, 'fear God and keep his commandments') has been read as either a faithful summary of Qohelet's deepest conviction or a corrective addendum by an orthodox editor who wanted to domesticate the book's radical skepticism. The tension between Qohelet's restless questioning and the epilogue's settled piety is real and may be deliberate — the book ends with both voices still audible.*

Connections: *The aging allegory's return to dust echoes Genesis 3:19 ('dust you are and to dust you will return') and 3:20. The spirit returning to God echoes Genesis 2:7 (God breathing life into the human) and reverses it. The epilogue's 'fear God and keep his commandments' echoes Deuteronomy 10:12-13 and the book's own internal counsel (5:6; 7:18; 8:12). The inclusio formed by 1:2 ('vapor of vapors') and 12:8 ('vapor of vapors') frames the entire book between identical thesis statements. The 'making of many books' observation (v. 12) is one of the oldest meta-literary comments in existence.*

[1]Remember your Creator in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years arrive of which you will say,
'I find no pleasure in them' —

[2]Before the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain —

[3]On the day when the guards of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
and the women who grind cease because they are few,
and those who look through the windows grow dim —

4When the doors to the street are shut
and the sound of the grinding fades,
when one rises at the sound of a bird
and all the daughters of song grow faint —

5When they are afraid of heights
and terrors lurk in the road,
and the almond tree blossoms white,
and the grasshopper drags itself along,
and the caper berry loses its power —
for a person is going to his eternal home,
and the mourners circle the streets —

6Before the silver cord is snapped
and the golden bowl is shattered,
before the jar is broken at the spring
and the wheel is crushed at the cistern —

7Then the dust returns to the earth as it was,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

8Vapor of vapors, says Qohelet. Everything is vapor. 9In addition to being wise, Qohelet also taught the people knowledge. He listened, investigated, and arranged many proverbs. 10Qohelet sought to find the right words, and what was written was upright — words of truth. 11The words of the wise are like goads, and like firmly embedded nails are the collected sayings. They are given by one Shepherd. 12Beyond these, my son, be warned: there is no end to the making of many books, and much study is a weariness of the body. 13The end of the matter, when all has been heard: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of every person. 14For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Some scholars read bore'ekha ('your Creator') as a wordplay on be'erekha ('your well/cistern,' a metaphor for wife in Proverbs 5:15-18) or borekha ('your pit/grave'). The Masoretic text's vowels clearly indicate 'your Creator,' and the context — remembering God before it is too late — supports this reading. The aging allegory now begins.

2. The cosmic imagery: sun, light, moon, and stars all darken. The phrase ve-shavu he-avim achar ha-geshem ('the clouds return after the rain') describes a sky that never clears — storm after storm. Metaphorically, this is the dimming of eyesight and the unrelieved succession of ailments in old age. What was once a cycle of rain-then-clearing becomes permanent overcast.

3. The house allegory: shomre ha-bayit ('the guards of the house') are the arms and hands, which tremble with age. Anshe ha-chayil ('the strong men') are the legs, which bend and stoop (hit'avvetu, 'become twisted, bent'). Ha-tochanot ('the grinding women') are the teeth, which cease functioning ki mi'etu ('because they are few' — teeth are lost). Ha-ro'ot ba-arubot ('those who look through the windows') are the eyes, which grow dark (chashekhu). Every line maps to a body part in decline.

4. The delatayim ('double doors') that shut may be the lips or ears, increasingly closed to the outside world. The qol ha-tachanah ('sound of grinding') fading reflects the diminished ability to eat (fewer teeth, softer food). Rising at qol ha-tsippor ('the voice of a bird') suggests the light, broken sleep of the elderly — any small sound wakes them. Benot ha-shir ('the daughters of song') growing faint describes either hearing loss (music becomes distant) or voice loss (the ability to sing weakens).

5. The almond tree (shaqed) pun: shaqed also sounds like shoqed ('the watching/wakeful one'), an association used in Jeremiah 1:11-12. Here the white blossoms signify gray/white hair. The grasshopper's burdened movement is a striking image of the body that was once light and agile. The caper berry (aviyonah) is known from rabbinic literature as an appetite stimulant; its failure marks the loss of desire itself.

6. The imagery shifts from metaphorical decline (vv. 2-5) to catastrophic collapse. The silver cord and golden bowl are objects of great value suddenly destroyed. The jar and wheel are functional tools suddenly useless. Together they depict death not as a gradual fading but as a series of breakages — snap, shatter, crack, crush.

7. The word ruach here almost certainly means 'breath' or 'life-spirit' rather than 'soul' in the later philosophical sense. Qohelet has questioned whether the human ruach ascends (3:21); here, at the poem's climax, he affirms it — or at least the editor allows this affirmation to stand as the poem's resolution. The God who gave the breath receives it back. This is not escape from vapor but return to the source.

8. The inclusio is complete. The book began with hevel havalim (1:2) and ends with hevel havalim. The thesis is unchanged: ha-kol havel ('everything is vapor'). Between these two bookends, Qohelet has tested wisdom, pleasure, wealth, achievement, justice, and mortality — and found all of them subject to the same verdict. The frame editor (ha-qohelet with the definite article) speaks here, returning the book to the third-person perspective of the superscription.

9. The epilogue begins. A new voice — a student, disciple, or editor — speaks about Qohelet in third person. Three activities are attributed to him: izzen ('he weighed, he listened carefully'), chiqqer ('he investigated, he searched out'), and tiqqen ('he arranged, he set in order') meshalim harbeh ('many proverbs'). The portrait is of a scholar-teacher who did not merely think but organized and transmitted his findings.

10. The editor commends both the form and content of Qohelet's writing. Divre chefets ('words of delight, pleasing words, the right words') refers to literary quality. Yosher ('uprightness, straightforwardness') refers to intellectual honesty. Divre emet ('words of truth') is the ultimate commendation: what Qohelet wrote is true, however uncomfortable.

11. Two images for wisdom's words: dorbenot ('goads,' the sharp sticks used to drive oxen) — they prod and sting, moving the hearer forward. Masmerot netu'im ('embedded nails, firmly planted nails') — they hold things together permanently. The ba'ale asuppot ('masters of collections' or 'collectors') may refer to wisdom teachers or to the collected sayings themselves. The phrase nitenu me-ro'eh echad ('they are given from one Shepherd') attributes all wisdom ultimately to God — the one Shepherd is the divine source.

12. The editor addresses beni ('my son') — the standard wisdom teacher's address to a student (Proverbs 1:8; 2:1; 3:1). The observation that asot sefarim harbeh ein qets ('making many books has no end') is both practical and meta-textual: even this book, which claims everything is vapor, adds to the infinite pile of books. The phrase lahag harbeh yegi'at basar ('much study is weariness of the flesh') echoes 1:18 ('with much wisdom comes much grief') but in bodily terms — the flesh itself grows tired from the effort of study.

13. The word mitsvot ('commandments') is general — it does not specify which commandments, leaving the scope open to the entire divine instruction. The phrase kol ha-adam ('the whole of the human, every person') is uniquely compact. In context, it functions as both 'this is the totality of human obligation' and 'this applies to every human being.' The epilogue provides the theological anchor that Qohelet's restless inquiry needed but could not, on its own terms, produce.

14. The book's final word is mishpat ('judgment'). God will judge kol ma'aseh ('every deed') — not just public acts but kol ne'lam ('every hidden thing'). The scope is total: im tov ve-im ra ('whether good or evil'). This is the theological counterweight to the vapor verdict: if everything is vapor, does anything matter? Yes — because God judges. The hidden things (ne'lam, from the root alam, 'to conceal, to hide') are specifically included, which means that even what escapes human notice does not escape divine evaluation. The book that began by questioning whether anything has lasting significance ends by affirming that God takes account of everything. Between 'everything is vapor' and 'God will judge every deed' lies the entire tension of Ecclesiastes, which the book holds open to the end.