**Qoheleth**- The Teacher- or The Preacher, or “Q,” as I’m calling him- opens up the great scripture of Ecclesiastes by saying “Hebel, hebel! Utterly hebel. Everything is hebel.” Literally **“hebel” is a vapor**, a fog, a breath- now you see it, now it’s gone. In the word “hebel” there is NO sense of permanence. **If everything is utterly hebel, then everything is utterly impermanent.**

Q revealed in ch1 two big themes in this book: 1:14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. And 13b What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind!  Q has surveyed everything done under the sun and his conclusion is that **something is wrong with the world in which we live. 1:15** What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. Something about life and the world is broke, wonky, bent, something’s missing.

And no matter what we do our actions don’t affect our existence as we hope they will. Q talks about this in the context of **“GAIN”** *–surplus, profit, advantage at the end.* He asks: **3** What do people **GAIN** from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? At the end of our days what do we have to show for all our toil under the sun? And his answer is: **nothing.** Nothing lasts. Everything fades. **Nothing is permanent.**

**Time** keeps us moving along until it ushers us **over the cliff of death**.

[*cheery thought, I know. Let your resident Eeyore enjoy his moment in the sun!! ---* Think this is sad stuff for us? Imagine how the message played for a people with **NO established theology of an after-life.** *The general perspective on death in Q’s day was death = oblivion.* The only life you have is this one- and after that: nothing. That was the perspective of the Sadducees in Jesus’ day. And it’s the perspective of many of your neighbors who like atheist authors like **Hitchens or Dawkins**.]

So, *Ya load 16 tons and what do you get?* Nothing! The struggle and futility of existence is a **“heavy burden” to bear.** And yet, paradoxically: ch3 tells us:

**11 [God] has also set eternity in the human heart;** We were NOT made for death, or futility, or impermanence. *We were made to live in perfect relationship to God and creation forever.* But then came Gen3. Those relationships were severely wounded but not destroyed.

**Even after “the Fall”** it is clear that God *gave us- his image-bearing humans- the responsibility to live our way through this bent world, following Him in the best way that we can*- knowing it would be hebel, and futility and impermanence would be the norm, **knowing that, for the time being, there would be no GAIN.**

Okay now, back to **Gen3** for a minute. **God** says don’t eat from that one tree because you’ll die if you do- and you don’t want that. The serpent slithers in saying: “You’re kidding! He said that? Actually, you eat this yummy fruit and you will GAIN the ability to know good from evil just the way God does! You. Will. Be. Like. God.”

**What is the serpent promising our intrepid couple?** [Gain, advantage].

He’s promising them they’ll be more than the simple creatures they are: **they will “be like God. The Enemy is promising them a surplus, an advantage, “GAIN.”** *And the perfect, sinless couple- living in paradise wanted the* ***GAIN.***

**But the Serpent was a liar.** There was no GAIN, only LOSS of the highest magnitude as they would live on through pain, broken relationships, hard labor and futility.

**Read your Bible** and you will see that, with an exception here and there, **Humans were and are consistently out for “GAIN,**” *rebelliously chasing after power, wealth, and most of all a well-established permanence*. Like after Noah- the population is on the rise and folks are spreading out and we’re told: **2** It came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. **3** They said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn *them* thoroughly.” And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. **4 They said, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top  *will reach* into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”**

**What were they after:** they wanted to build a monument to their own greatness- a city with a tower reaching up to Heaven- so everyone would know their name and their renown. Why? So they wouldn’t be scattered, small, powerless and weak. In the face of **death** in a wide world they wanted **permanence**. **They wanted their name and work to** –somehow- **live forever.**

They wanted an **advantage, surplus, GAIN.***[God threw a linguistic monkeywrench in.]*

The **tower-building Babylonians** are precisely the sort of people for whom Q wrote Ecclesiastes: People who insist that, by knowledge, wealth, and/or power they can undo the twisted futility of the universe, replace the missing piece of our world- **all by human effort** –what we do**.**

Q ends ch1 saying he intends to study/explore by wisdom **everything people do under the sun.** He’ll even use wisdom to study wisdom as well as madness & folly.

And so ch 2 begins: **1** I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with **pleasure** to find out what is good.” The Hebrew for pleasure is *sim-HA*- that’s joy, gladness, mirth, delight*.* Q says in v3 he …wanted to see what was good **for people to do** under the heavens during the few days of their lives. Since Q is speaking from the **persona of King Solomon-** the wisest and wealthiest King ever over Israel- this **exploration of pleasure** makes perfect sense. He tells us

10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.

So if he wanted to go down to **Doc’s Marina grill** and eat shrimp until he couldn’t eat any more- he did it. If he felt a hankering for a bag of **oreos** stuck in a half-gallon of **Extreme Moose Tracks Ice Cream** he bought it. If Tesla-kiah came out with a solar powered chariot and he wanted one in race car red- he got it. If he wanted a salt-water swimming pool with dolphins in it or he wanted the priciest bottle of wine from the winery every night- or a few bottles every night, or if he wanted the golden-age of Israel version of the **Rolling Stones or Beyonce** to give a command performance they did. And if he wanted a **beautiful woman** in his bed every night- he could afford that too. He “denied [himself] “nothing [his] eyes desired and [he] refused his heart no pleasure.

But the result of all his *highly scientific research* was that the pursuit of pleasure:

**1b … proved to be meaningless-** hebel, a dissipating vapor- nothing. There’s nothing intrinsically evil with pleasure. *But the pursuit of pleasure in hope of some sort of end of life advantage over death [gain/permanence]* ***is pointless.***

A lot of people in our world deliberately chase down pleasure whether it’s **getting stuff** or getting high, or getting a rush from extreme sports [climbing Everest, running with the bulls, base jumping] or eating extreme foods or taking extreme vacations or owning extreme pets. Like some of those folks, *Q, here, engaged in a deliberate exit from “rationality” into indulgence [his wisdom still guiding him] in hopes of finding some “secret of life” that ordinary reason might be blocking.* But **there is no *“secret GAIN”* hidden within pleasure**. So the **pursuit of pleasure** for the sake of gain or some sort of permanence **is…pointless.**

The next **pleasure** Q explores is the pleasure of imagining, designing, building great architectural achievements. Solomon was a renowned builder [1Kings 7]. So Q tells us:

4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. 5 I made gardens and parks and planted **all kinds of fruit trees** in them. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.

Did you notice in the description the phrase: *“all kinds of trees”* or “*every kind of tree?”*

All my references see this pointing to the garden in Genesis. And, more, the Hebrew for ***“parks”***is from a Persian word that gives us our English word **Paradise.** Our **pleasure-testing, pseudo-Solomon**, has taken on the role of a god- creating his own mini-paradise, a secular Garden of Eden in which there are **no “forbidden fruits.”** His paradise is peopled with his slaves who give birth to more slaves. It’s full of silver and gold, and **singers** –male and female- to have music whenever he wants. And, of course, a harem for the sake of sex whenever he wants [700 wives/300 concubines-indicator of wealth].

Again: as Q puts it: 10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.

**But the unfortunate result of all of his research into pleasure is the realization:** 11Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was **gained** under the sun. He lived like a **modern Rock Star**, or some wealthy, flamboyant, multiple-mansion, party-hopping, traveling-with-an-entourage, Reality TV star. But **in the light of wisdom**, the houses, gardens parks, slaves, the treasure, the sex, the indulgence was all a **fleeting vapor.** His effort to get gain through pleasure was like trying to **grab a handful of fog**, or trying to capture the wind.

**So then Q turns to a comparison of wisdom and folly.**

And surprise! Wisdom is better because it’s a useful tool that brings light to life, helping us see and understand the world clearly and avoid unnecessary pitfalls. **But an unexpected and disturbing result comes out of the research.** 16 Like the fool the wise, too, must die.

It doesn’t matter if you’re a wise man or a foolish man, The King or the court Jester, The professor or Gilligan, **the same fate overtakes all of them** and all of us, too. 16 Like the fool the wise, too, must die. And ultimately be forgotten! So…15b What do I gain by being wise? So though Wisdom is helpful in the present- when it comes to any sort of end of life advantage, any gain, it’s still hebel, vapor, a dissipating fog.

And, adding insult to injury: besides having to die, the wise man also loses EVERYTHING he’s toiled for under the sun. 21 For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.  Everything accumulated, **everything built, all the wealth and wives and slaves- all fall into the lap of someone else**- who might not even be wise!! That’s hebel.

Q’s **pseudo-Solomon is angry, frustrated, and despairing** because he’s come face to face with the FACT of his own **IMPERMANENCE**. No matter how much he knows, no matter how much he owns, no matter how many experiences he stacks up, no matter the size of his playboy status, no matter how many architectural marvels he constructs, no matter how much sleep he loses from “anxious striving” [2:22-23] – HE WILL DIE AND BE FORGOTTEN, just like the fool –no advantage, no gain. 16 For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered; the days have already come when both have been forgotten.

Now a question we might ask is why does this bother him so much? There’s a clue in ch3 that I mentioned earlier. 10 I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. **He has also set eternity in the human heart;** yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Part of **the Heavy Burden God has laid on mankind** is that while He has assigned us the task of living forward in this Fallen, crooked world we are still God’s image-bearing humans. We were not made for lacking or crooked. We were made for **perfect, continuous fellowship with God and the Creation.**

In making us God set ETERNITY in our human heart.

This is why we KNOW **it’s not supposed to be like this:** dying and being forgotten. This is why we are angered or despairing over **our own impermanence.** This is why Q is frustrated about losing everything he’d given his life to. *God has set eternity in our hearts* but we still have to live our way through this crooked, lacking existence.

**It was never supposed to be this way.** But it is. And God calls us to carry on.

Our human awareness of **impermanence** and our **fear of oblivion** and **being forgotten** leads lots of folks without the means –but plenty of credit cards- to try to experience life like King Q- live it up while you can. Others -with the means- **work to gain power or renown**- to make a place in history books or some Who’s who list. Others with the skill aim to build something incredible that will give them some sort of permanence, immortality: The **Eiffel Tower**, China’s Great Wall, **Chicago’s Sears Tower,** Nebuchadnezzar’s giant statue of himself … or maybe just **“bigger barns.”**

Remember, Ecclesiastes was part of the scripture Jesus knew and read. And the message of Ecclesiastes was very much a part of Jesus’ teaching about how to live in this for-the-time-being crooked, lacking, fallen world. In Luke 12 Jesus warns against every sort of Greed. And then he told a story about a rich man whose land was so productive he didn’t have enough room to store it all for him and his household. So he tore down the old barns and built *massive, new, state of the art barns* to store all his goods for his own GAIN. [He’s chasing after permanence]. Jesus portrays the rich man saying to himself **19** ‘Self,…you have many goods laid up for many years *to come;* take your ease, eat, drink *and* be merry.”’ **20** “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This *very* night your soul is required of you; and  *now* who will own what you have prepared?’

**And here’s the punchline to Jesus story:**

**Luke 12:22** He said to His disciples, “For this reason I say to you, **do not worry about *your*  life,** *as to* what you will eat; nor for your body, *as to* what you will put on. **23** “For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. “**Do not worry about *your*  life!”**

Oh, my dears, this is the exact conclusion that Qoheleth comes to in 2:24-26: “Don’t worry about your life, relax and enjoy the good blessings God gives, as they come”. Q will come back to it over and over again.

**Our work as God’s children** is to make our way through this crooked, lacking, Fallen world by following God’s Call and seeking to please Him, the best we possibly can.

**All artificial attempts** to gain advantage or establish some sort of permanence or lasting influence [fame, wealth, status, accomplishment-GAIN] will be meaningless. **Because time and death**-the great equalizers- **wipe all of that away.**

“Don’t worry about your life, relax and enjoy the good blessings God gives, as they come”

**Qoheleth ends ch2 warning us:** Stop racing and chasing. [There’s no gain in indulgence or playing God or playing King] Don’t worry about **gain, or permanence, or advantage.** Because… [**24**](http://biblehub.com/ecclesiastes/2-24.htm)A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This …is from the hand of God,  Forget “GAIN.” Live to please God in this “present moment,” and receive his wisdom and joy. Because, [**25**](http://biblehub.com/ecclesiastes/2-25.htm)without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

Right along with Q, **Jesus says:** don’t be like the “bigger barns guy.” **“Don’t worry about your life.”** Consider the Ravens. Consider the Lillies. “For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things. **31** “But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you.

Remember the **rich young man** in Mk10? When he asked Jesus, “What do I need to do to get Eternal Life?” He was trying to lock in GAIN by some earthy action- Kinda like Q. He wants to know the thing to do that will establish him a reserved spot in Eternal Life. Jesus says: obey the commandments. He says: “I always have.” Mark says: Jesus looked at him and loved him and said: There’s one thing missing: “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” **22** At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

**Qoheleth didn’t know about Jesus**. He didn’t know about eternal life, or God’s plan to redeem the Kosmos and take us back to Eden again. But the message Q gave to his “Gathering” is the same message Jesus gives to us:

Don’t worry about **gain, or permanence, or advantage** in this crooked, lacking, fallen world. Forget trying to play king or god with your life. In fact, **“Don’t worry about your life.” Says Q:** 24 A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, 25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?  **And from Jesus:** Lk 12:30 your Father knows that you need these things. **31** “[so] seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you.

**You know so much more than Qoheleth ever would.** You know about God’s plan to redeem the Kosmos. You know who Jesus is, and about the cross and the resurrection- and all that it implies.

But in this crooked world, humans can still be tempted to chase after fame, legacy, false permanence. But Jesus looks at you –at all of us- with love and says:

**Find your pleasure in God. Don’t worry about your life, just follow me.**