**ECCLESIASTES: LIFE UNDER THE SUN**

**Formal Scheme of the Seeker’s Sermon Symphony**

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Some time ago the *Woman’s Journal* carried an interview with Spanish pop singer Julio Iglesias. He said he suffered from depression caused by hordes of adoring women. There are times when he just can’t take any more, confessed the singer who has dated women such as Ursula Andress, Priscilla Presley and Diana Ross. “Sometimes I just go to my room alone when I’ve had enough of all the fans,” he was quoted as saying. “It’s then that I have one of my low periods when it’s easy to feel I have nothing.” Iglesias, then 44, didn’t regard himself as good looking. “I’m not handsome and I’ve got skinny legs,” he said.

The quest for meaning in life is not new. Over the centuries, men and women have struggled with the same questions that may be plaguing you. The “solutions” they have found are enlightening.

* A French playwright named Jean Paul Sartre concluded there is no exit from this meaningless existence.
* Henry David Thoreau wrote, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”
* Shakespeare had Macbeth describe life as “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

A father went into a toy store to buy his son a Christmas present. The salesman showed him a new educational toy. It came unassembled. No matter how the child tried to put the pieces together, they would not fit. The toy was designed to teach about life. Such is the predicament of mankind. To the any-century person, life can be an unsolved puzzle, like a Rubrik’s Cube with no solution.

The Book of Ecclesiastes provides the best news for such baffled people. It is the book for people who want to know how to enjoy life in a puzzling world. It is the working person’s book. It answers his boredom with the routine of eating, drinking and earning a paycheck. It is also the thinking person’s book. It responds to his haunting questions “Who am I? What is the meaning of life? Should I be worldlier than thou or holier than thou? Or is there a third alternative that is simultaneously world accepting and God honoring?”

1. Superscription (1:1)

The Seeker artistically sets forth the proper response to life’s puzzle in a sermon symphony. He provides three keys to the purpose and plan of the symphony: the opening and ending keynote or motif, the recurring phrases or contrasting themes, and the closing statement of 12:9-12.

1. Opening Keynote or Motif – “All is vanity” (1:2).

What’s a musical motif?\* A motif is a basic musical idea rarely more than a half dozen notes in sequence, but notes with an attitude. The classic example is the “dut dut dut duhhhhh” motif that opens Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. He took four notes and wrote a symphony around them. That was some motif. It is perhaps the signature of Beethoven’s music.

The opening keynote or motif of Ecclesiastes is a gaunt and stark announcement, *“Vanity of vanities, says the Seeker, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”* It pounds into our heads and hearts the problem of human existence. It reverberates through our soul like the opening notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.

The word “vanity” occurs thirty-seven times in the book. The Hebrew word (*hebel*) describes “a wisp, a vapor, a puff of wind, a mere breath – nothing you could get your hands on; the nearest thing to zero;” in fact, a zero with the edges rubbed off.

The Seeker thoroughly tested every facet of human activity and thought, work and wisdom, and found everything perplexing and profitless. He expresses this verdict in the trumpet not “vanity.” This one note sums up the total of our journey through this cursed creation.

Romans 8:20 is the New Testament commentary on Ecclesiastes. It tells us plainly that “vanity” (*mataiotes*) exists, and also that it has a beginning and an end. Before its beginning and beyond its end is God, and a creation without vanity. Genesis one tells us of the formation of a good creation. Genesis three informs us of the subjection of creation to vanity or futility under a curse. Revelation twenty-two teaches us of the liberation of creation to freedom from the curse.

The keynote is not the grumbling of a pessimist. It is the trumpet note sounding the theme of the overture.

1. Overture – There is no meaning in the temporal futile creation (1:3-11).

What’s a musical overture? A musical overture is an introductory movement that introduces themes to be heard later in the composition.

* + What profit is there in man’s labor? (1:3)
  + We live in a world of wearisome repetition (1:4-8).
  + We contribute nothing new (1:9-10).
  + We leave no lasting effect (1:11).

Motifs are but the fragments from which melodies and themes are nurtured into existence. Themes and melodies are required to sustain listener interest and make music memorable.

1. Statement of Theme – Our work and wisdom are futile (1:12-18).

As one of the wealthiest and wises men who has ever lived, the Seeker could do whatever he wanted. He found, however, that all his work and wisdom was futile.

1. Development of Theme and Contrasting Theme -- We can either endure life in futility or enjoy life in the fear of God (1:19 – 11:6).

What’s a musical theme? A theme is a section of music that in turn is a constituent part of some larger musical structure such as sonata allegro form or theme and variations form. In Sonata Allegro form, two or more themes are introduced like actors in a drama and represent forces, ideas, views that will interact to give depth and meaning to the larger form. In theme and variations form, a theme is introduced and then followed by multiple variations on the theme.

Appreciate the drama (motifs, themes, exposition, development, recapitulation). Some music is all about the dramatic interaction of its parts – like Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony that opens with the big “dut dut dut duhhhhh” motif. Beethoven builds this into a big, ugly brute of a theme that is full of evil foreboding . . . then a horn call introduces a lyric and gentle second theme – a true melody. But just as the listener is starting to relax, the brute is back, and the battle is joined. It’s good against evil; darkness and despair against hope and optimism. There is wreckage and desolation everywhere, victories cut short by counter attacks, and it’s all great drama!

The repetition, variation, and contrast of two key themes provide a clue to the plan and purpose of Ecclesiastes. They punctuate the whole book and play a significant part in the development of the sermon symphony.

The first theme is the futility of all things “*under the sun.”* The phrase *“under the sun”* is a metonymy of adjunct in which the location is named instead of the thing. It stands for the place where the toil of man occurs, the world that God subjected to futility, the earth (see 8:14, 16; 11:2).

The second theme contrasts with the first and reveals the proper response to the futility of life on earth. The Seeker recommends the wholehearted enjoyment of life in the fear of God. He arranges his texts in such a way as to state the theme with increasing emphasis and solemnity (2:24-26; 3:12-14, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9).

1. First Movement – Because human endeavors are futile, we should enjoy life in the fear of God (2:1 – 6:9).

What is a symphonic movement? A movement is a portion of a composition that can be identified by form or as a stand alone section.

The repetition of *“futility and striving after the wind”* functions as a structural marker for the first half (movement) of the book reflecting the Seeker’s observation about the futility of human work (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9).

* 1. Theme and Contrasting Theme – Since our endeavors are futile, we should enjoy life in the fear of God (2:1 – 4:3).
     1. Theme – The quest for meaning in life is futile (2:1 – 2:23).
        1. The quest for meaning through pleasure is futile (2:1-11).

The Seeker first recounts his efforts at bringing pleasure his way. He tried lifting his spirits with wine and folly, busying himself with building programs, priding himself in amassing wealth, indulging himself in music and sex, and vaulting his name into international attention. A through search of all things on earth leads to the staggering conclusion that everything is futile and meaningless, *“All was vanity and striving after the wind.”* Power, prestige, pleasure – nothing can fill the God-shaped void in the human heart.

* + - 1. The quest for meaning through wisdom or folly is futile (2:12-17).

The Seeker confesses his disappointment in the limitations of human wisdom. Though wisdom helps temporarily, it cannot prevent death. Death is the great leveler of the wise and the foolish.

* + - 1. The quest for meaning through labor is futile (2:18-23).

Like a frazzled predecessor of workaholics today, the Seeker attempts to find significance in his work. He finds, however, that his efforts are frustrating and ineffectual in bringing meaning to his life. The more he worked, the less he had of any real value. All that he was reaping for his work was sorrow, distress, and sleepless nights. For most labor does not provide exhilaration but exhaustion.

* + 1. Contrasting Theme – enjoy life in the fear of God (2:24 – 4:3).
       1. Enjoy life as a gift of God (2:24-26).
       2. God has preordained a proper time for everything (3:1-8).
       3. Since we cannot know God’s plan, we should enjoy life in the fear of God (3:9-15).

3:11 tells why it is futile to search for meaning on earth. God has twisted things so that we will find no lasting satisfaction in our fallen state (see 1:15; 7:13-14). He calls us to believe that ultimately everything will fit together beautifully and commands us in the meantime to enjoy life and to fear him.

* + - 1. God will ultimately judge injustice, but permits it now to show mankind’s beastial character (3:16 – 4:3).
  1. Variation of Theme and Contrasting Theme – Since our labor is futile, we should enjoy life in the fear of God (4:4 – 6:9).
     1. Theme – Labor is futile when motivated by envy, avarice, and ambition, but sharing is good (4:4-16).
     2. Contrasting Theme – Fear God instead of following empty pursuits (5:1-9).
     3. Theme – Wealth, the fruit of labor, is futile because it does not satisfy and can be lost (5:10-17).
     4. Contrasting Theme – Only God gives the ability to enjoy labor and its rewards (5:18 – 6:9).

1. Second Movement – Because we don’t know what is good for us or what the future holds, we should enjoy life in the fear of God (6:10 – 11:6).

The Seeker turns his attention in his quest for significance to the limitations of human wisdom. He finds that not only can he not do anything significant, but also he cannot understand the scheme of things. The recurring phrases *“who knows what is good for a man?”* (6:12; 7:14, 24, 28; 8:7, 17) and *“man does not know what awaits him*” (9:1, 12; 10:14; 11:2, 5, 6) reflect the Seeker’s observations about the inability of human wisdom.

* 1. Theme – We do not know what is good for us or what the future holds (6:10-12).

The Seeker summarises man’s plight. Man cannot dispute with God, for he has foreordained all things and is stronger. Such an argument with God would only heighten man’s insignificance. Man does not know what is good for him now, much less what lies ahead of him.

* 1. Combined Themes – Since we do not know what is good for us, we should enjoy life in the fear of God (7:1 – 8:17).
     1. We should enjoy prosperity and trust God in adversity (7:1-14).

Man cannot determine adversity or prosperity for himself. Only God controls circumstances and no man can either predict or reverse God’s prerogatives.

* + 1. We should avoid extremes in behavior and seek to lead a balanced life (7:15-29).
    2. We should submit to those in authority in order to avoid trouble (8:1-9).
    3. We should fear God since we cannot understand the work of God in the world (8:10-17).
  1. Combined Themes – Since we do not know what the future holds, we should enjoy life in the fear of God (9:1 – 11:6).
     1. We should enjoy the present since the future is beyond our control and we will eventually die (9:1-10).
     2. Our wisdom is limited since the future is uncertain (9:11 – 10:11).
     3. We should be careful not to criticize since the future is uncertain and foolish words harmful (10:12-20).
     4. We should diligently labor since the outcome is uncertain and in God’s hands (11:1-6).

1. Finale – There is meaning in remembering the eternal faithful Creator (11:7 – 12:7).

What is a musical finale? The finale is the last movement in a composition of several movements.

* + We should enjoy life now and remember that death will come (11:7-8).
  + We should enjoy our fleeting youth as we remember that God will judge our works (11:9-10).
  + We should remember God before old age removes the capacity to enjoy life and we die (12:1-7).

1. Repetition of Keynote or Motif – “All is vanity” (12:8).

The keynote sentence is trumpeted to close the finale. It had been previously trumpeted to open the overture (1:2).

1. Statement of Purpose and Plan – The Seeker’s words are goads to stimulate us and nails to stabilize us (12:9-12).

The Seeker informs us that he has carefully pondered and planned the contents of the book. His teachings are meant both to stimulate as “goads” and to stabilize as “nails.” The ox-goad was a herder’s spear-like wooden stick, often eight feet long, with a metal point on one end to sting the oxen. The nail was made of iron or gold; the iron for securing massive city gates (1 Chr. 22:3), the gold for affixing ornamental plates to the walls or ceilings of the temple (2 Chr. 3:9).

The goads are the reflections on the futility of life; the nails are the instructions to enjoy life in the fear of God. The source of the Seeker’s words is the Shepherd – the Lord of Israel. The search for truth in any other source is endless and wearisome.

1. Application – Fear God and keep his commandments.

The conclusion is an exhortation to “fear God and keep his commandments.” This is the best way to deal with the futility of life because it applies to everyone, and because God will ultimately judge every act.

The futility of earthly life should goad us to enjoy life in the fear of God. Both the exhortations to enjoy life and to fear God are woven in the fabric of the book (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12). Don’t endure life in futility. ***Enjoy life in the fear of God.*** Move beyond the futility of life to a series of four righteous responses.

The first response is to ***be glad***. Enjoy God’s good gifts. The gifts should be a source of constant satisfaction when we are properly related to the Giver (see James 1:17).

Enjoy work! We are to tell ourselves that our labor is good (2:24). This advice is repeated in 3:13, 22; 5:18; and 9:7. The enjoyment of work is not found in its temporary results but in God’s approval (9:7; see Colossians 3:23-24). Work hard at whatever life calls you to do, and enjoy your work as you do it. Leave to God its issues. Let him measure its ultimate worth. Your part is to use all the good sense and enterprise at your command to exploit the opportunities before you.

Enjoy life! Rather than fear death, enjoy the few years of your life (5:18). Life is a precious commodity to be enjoyed now before it slips away (11:8-9). The enjoyment of life can be a shared joy with a wife in a lifetime commitment (9:9).

The second response is to ***do good***. Prepare for judgment. The exhortation to enjoy life is not to be confused with hedonism. As much as we are to delight in every moment of life, we are also to live in light of the certainty of divine judgment. The theme of God’s judgment is first mentioned in 3:17, developed further in 8:12-18 and 11:9, and incorporated in the final exhortation of 12:14. Our joy in the present must be tempered by the promise of God’s judgment in the future. The present injustices will be set straight. The wrongdoer will not prosper in God’s final day.

The third response is to ***hear God***. Obey God! This advice begins as a hint and gradually develops to a specific exhortation (2:26; 3:12; 5:1-6; 8:2; 9:1, 7; 10:2; 12:1, 13). The best thing we can do is submit to the laws of God since we are unable on our own to ascertain the laws of life.

The fourth response is to ***fear God***. Fear God! This is the summary expression of our relationship to God. We must worship him rightly and walk before him uprightly.

We are living through vanity. The futility of our existence is a goad to drive us to God. To be goaded hurts! It demands a response. God has twisted all things so that we may not be content with anything on earth.

Chris Evert Lloyd said she struggled to keep her tennis gave sharp and her marriage interesting. “I woke up recently in the night with palpitations. I couldn’t remember how old I was,” the then 31 year old athlete said in an issue of *Life* magazine. “I thought what the heck am I doing? Why am I still playing?” Of her marriage to John Lloyd she said, “We get into a rut. We play tennis, we go to a movie, we watch TV, but I keep saying, ‘John, there has to be more.’”

Pascal astutely observed, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the creator as revealed in Jesus Christ.” Augustine accurately confessed, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you.” The right response is not to kick against the goads but to move in the direction in which we are goaded. Go to God!

“Vanity of vanities” is the verdict on all of life. Hear God! Fear God! Be glad! Do good! This is the counsel in view of the verdict, the nails which will stabilize you on your life journey under the sun. *“Dut dut dut duhhhhh.”*

\*http://www.music.vt.edu/musicdictionary/