

Preaching the Genres of Ecclesiastes

1. The Challenge (An example from Eccl. 1:12-18)

[12] I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. [13] And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. [14] I have seen everything that is done under the sun	Testimony/Memoir: <i>A Personal autobiographical narrative</i>
, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. [15] What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.	Proposition: <i>A statement asserting a truth (in this case, using poetry)</i>
[16] I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." [17] And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.	Testimony/Memoir
I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.	Proposition: (this time using personal testimony)
[18] For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.	Poetry in the form of proverb: <i>A small statement of poetic speech, designed to illumine large insight, observation or advice.¹</i>

2. The Genres Ecclesiastes Uses for Wise Instruction

A. Wise Instruction through Propositions (Using Prosaic or Poetic speech)

[1] Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. [2] Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore, let your words be few. [3] For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words. [4] When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. [5] It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. [6] Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? [7] For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear. (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)

- Preaching Help

Use the same tools you'd use to preach a New Testament Letter

- Sample Sermon Rough Draft (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7)

FCF: Sometimes we get hurt when we go to church (vs. 1) We begin to lose the right kind of fear and begin to feel the kind of fear we weren't meant to. (vs. 7b)
COR: clueless and foolish people bring evil into the church (vs. 1)
GL: we feel deeply that something is wrong about the church causing pain, because we were created for security, safety and rest in the presence of God
Big Idea: Because God teaches us to fear him, we must go to church wisely
 1. Wise when we hear church people speak (vs. 1-2)
 2. Wise when we hear church people make promises (vs. 4-6)
 3. Wise when we hear church people tell us their life goals (vs. 3 & 7)

B. Wise Instruction through the Use of Questions

Think about what a question acts differently than a statement:

“What will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your soul?” (Luke 9:25)

Instead of, making the connections for you, (let me tell you what profit is, teach you about gain, expound on the world for you, give you the right theology of the soul, give definitions to forfeiture, and now tell you to examine yourself). The question requires the one questioned to put language to these things and to examine oneself in relationship to them. The question slows everything down and requires the one questioned to actively participate by searching their own inner and outer life and bringing materials for the answer to the table.

- “is there a thing of which it is said, ‘see this is new?’ (1:10)
- “what use is pleasure?” (2:2)
- “what gain has the worker from his toil?” (3:9)
- “who knows whether the spirit of a man goes upward and the spirits of the beast goes down into the earth?” (3:21)
- “for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?” (4:8)
- “why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?” (5:6)
- Why should you destroy yourself? . . . Why should you die before your time? (Eccl. 7:16-17)
- That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? (Eccl. 7:24)
- For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? (Eccl. 8:6-7)

- Preaching Help

Let a question be a question. To help us feel its intended force, (1) consider letting a question act as its own main point or separate idea in the sermon, (2) Then use the “makes sense, they say, you say, pause, move on” approach

- 1. Makes Sense:** *This question makes sense to us doesn't it?* [If we experienced or saw what Solomon experienced or saw, we too would ask this question wouldn't we?]
- 2. They Say:** *How would those you know try to answer this question?* [those in our world who experience this, what answers do they offer?]
- 3. You Say:** *What about you? How are you trying to answer this question right now?* [call upon/invite us to feel the importance of personally becoming present to this question for our own life]
- 5. Pause:** like you mean it [by the silence help us know that this isn't a rhetorical but a real question—such that we begin to grapple with it for ourselves]
- 6. Move on** to the next point

- Sample Sermon Rough Draft (Ecclesiastes 4:7-9)

Main Point: Workaholism Enlivens our Outer Life (4:7, “I saw”)

- Satisfied with no relationships
- Satisfied with a life of only work
- Never satisfied even though he’s rich so works all-the-more

Main Point: Workaholism Deadens our Inner Life (4:8, “he never asks, “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?”)

- Makes sense: we are so fatigued with work and making money and paying bills who has time to ask bigger questions about our soul or our purpose or the quality of our relationships?
- They say: think about someone you care about who works too much—always on the go, even those who work at home, taking kids here and there and there again and here again. Why would they say they don’t ask about the condition of their soul or purpose in life? (a) no time, (b) too tired, (c) that would be selfish (d) apathy, (e) cynicism (f) we are all stuck anyway (g) money and productivity is most important for a good life.
- You Say: How about you? Has it been a while since you’ve asked about why you are doing what you are doing? Since you’ve asked about the condition of your relationships, your purpose in life with God?
- Pause
- Move on

Workaholism enlivens our outer life

But it deadens our inner life

No wonder:

Main Point: Workaholism Gives us an Unhappy Life in the End (4:8, Proposition: This also is vanity . . . unhappy)

C. Wise Instruction through Testimony/Memoir

<p>Chapters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eccl. 1:12-18 • Eccl. 2 • Eccl. 3:9-4:7 • Eccl. 7:14-29 <p><i>A word about “Redemptive Vulnerability”²</i></p>	<p>Identifying Marks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I have seen,” • “I said to my heart” • “I said” • “if you see” • “I perceived” • “I saw” • “I made” • “I considered” • “behold”
--	---

- Preaching Help

Notice each change in personal statements. Each change helps you know when one main idea or section ends, and another begins

² Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons that Connect with our Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2008), . Kindle Location 1096-1148.

Preaching Ecclesiastes

- Sample Sermon Rough Draft (Ecclesiastes 3:16-22)

Main Point 1: God Hasn't Made Everything Right Yet "I saw" (vs. 16)

Poetry

A Justice

B Wickedness,

A Righteousness

B Wickedness

Main Point 2: God humbles us as We Wait "I said in my heart" 2x (vs. 17-20)

God will judge the wicked

Death comes to all creatures

We too take nothing with us (proverbial saying, dust to dust)

- Question as a separate sub point (vs. 21), "Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to earth?"
- *Makes sense:* some of us are surprised by his question. We want to say immediately that people go to heaven and animals do not. But for others of us the question of this person who believes in God makes sense to us. How would we know that animals aren't cared for in the future in some way?
- *They say:* think about someone you care about who feels the care of people and animals and feels deeply the sadness of death or being judged. How might they answer this question? . . . Some are pleasantly surprised by this God-talker and are happy with the thought of animals in heaven. For others, Well, they might say, people have souls and animals do not, so obviously, animals have no future after death. But Solomon's question seems to be, how do you know that animals without souls have no after-death future? Who has told you this and what advantage would the answer give you anyway?
- *You Say:* As you hear Solomon and those you know in conversation, as it were, how about you? Do you believe that you have an advantage as it relates to death and who goes where when we die? Do you believe that you are all good and have it all figured out? How do you know the way you have it all figured out is right?
- *Pause*
- *Move on*

Main Point 3: God invites us to a Joy We Otherwise Overlook "so I saw" (vs. 22)

Main Point 4: God says leave the future to him, take a look at what is in front of you Question (vs. 22), "Who can bring him to see what will be after him?"

D. Wise Instruction through Poetic Speech

Overview:

- Wise Instruction through Parable/Story
- Wise Instruction through Poem (metaphor, simile, rhythm)
- Wise Instruction through Proverb

Preaching Ecclesiastes

The Greek philosopher **Epicurus (342-271 BCE)** used syllogistic logic and claimed that the existence of God proved there is no God.

- He claimed that if God cannot stop evil then he is not all-powerful (omnipotent).
- He then argued that if God can prevent evil but does not, then God is not good.
- He linked these two points together, claiming that if God is all-powerful and good, then evil would not exist.
- Finally, human experience is that evil does exist. Therefore, Epicurus concluded that God must not exist.

This makes sense. “Westerners do their serious thinking and communication in concepts. We might include a story or illustration or simplify an idea or to make it memorable, but to us, the concept is always primary, not the illustration . . . Western reasoning often attempts to systematize theology by reducing and affixing God’s thoughts onto a logical grid, flattening and straightening them so that they fit into predictable patterns.”³ In contrast, consider Matthew 13, how Jesus addresses the problem of evil through the use of concrete images. Many of us are accustomed to explaining the Biblical text by means of abstract concepts and ideas derived from word definitions. Poetic speech, like proverbs, requires us to reason through verbal images derived from the physical world of creation and providence.

*Sometimes, the images shock us, they make us scratch our heads and say,
“Wait a minute. What?” Remember, this juxtaposition of images is on purpose.
The shock is meant to expose the truth.*

1. Wise Instruction through Parable/Story

Remember how a parable/instructive story functions . . .

[13] I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. [14] There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege works against it. [15] But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. [16] But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. [17] The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. [18] Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. (Eccl. 9:13-18; see also Eccl. 12:1-8)

- Preaching Help

*Use the inductive tools, scene by scene, that you would use when preaching
Biblical Narratives or Parables in the Old Testament, Gospels and Acts*

- Sample Sermon Rough Draft (Ecclesiastes 9:13-18)

³ Lois Tverberg, *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus: How a Jewish Perspective Can Transform Your Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2017), 89, 97.

FCF: we try to find greatness in all the wrong ways (the word, “great” repeated 3x in vs. 13-14)

COR: the world around us often incentivizes foolish definitions of greatness

GL: We long to make a difference and to matter because God created us with dignity and purpose

Big Question: *What does it take to live a great life?*

Scene 1: vs. 14 (the little city and the great king)

- Besieging
- Building
- Might
- Shouting
- Weapons of War

Small Answer: Bearing with the Foolish Pursuit of False Greatness (the little city and the great king)

Scene 2: vs. 15 (the poor man)

- poor (repeated 3x)
- delivered the city
- no one remembered

Small Answer: Bearing with the Foolish Forgetfulness of Wise Greatness

Scene 3: vs. 16 (the narrator)

- despised
- not heard
- quiet
- better

Small Answer: Listening to the Wise Whisper of Greatness (the narrator)

Scene 4: 17-18, (teaching, moral of the story)

Small Answer: Taking your stand on Greatness of a different kind (the moral or teaching)

Big Answer: *possessing greatness, yes, but greatness as God in his wisdom defines it*

2. Wise Instruction through Poem (simile, metaphor, parallelisms)

Ecccl. 1:1-11; 3:1-8; 4:9-16; 9:11-12 Biblical similes and metaphors, value creation and providence as legitimate materials for wise communication (Jesus assumes the same in his teaching)

Scholars assume types of parallelism in Hebrew Poetry. Here are two.

- Synonymous:
 - Static A=B two or more differing ways of saying the same idea
 - Dynamic A what’s more B two or more descriptions expanding on one idea
- Antithetical/Contrastive: A vs. B two competing ideas which show contrast

Preaching Ecclesiastes

[3] What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?	Framing Question/theme-Inclusio with 12:8, gain
[4] A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.	Image/idea: a generation Antithetic Parallelism: comparing people vs. the earth A vs. B
[5] The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.	Image/idea: the sun Expanding parallelism: filling out the image of sun A and what's more B
[6] The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns	Image/idea: the wind Expanding parallelism: filling out the image of wind A and what's more B
[7] All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.	Image/idea: Water streams and the sea Synonymous parallelism: saying the same thing two different ways A =B
[8] All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.	Image/idea: all things, man, the voice, the eye, the ear Metaphor: things that are weary, an unuttered mouth, an unsatisfied eye, an unfilled ear
[9] What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. [10] Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has been already in the ages before us.	Image/idea: time and events repeat Synonymous Question: fortifies the same theme A = B
[11] There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.	Image/idea: memory Expanding parallelism: no memory, past or future A and what's more B

- Preaching Help

(1) Let change in parallelisms and change of images identify when one idea ends, and another begins. Preach verse by verse, poetic idea by poetic idea, one after the other. (2) Look for the Big Idea by (a) noticing a teaching or moral at the beginning or near the end of the poem and/or (2) by noticing the use of well-placed questions Or (3) repeated words/concepts/ideas.

- Sample Sermon Rough Draft (Ecclesiastes 1:3-11)

FCF: we want to arrive-to achieve something, to know that somehow we made a difference, this life mattered

COR: pressures all around us to be somebody and do something that shows we arrived and achieved

GL: we have this longing because we were created to feel complete like we had gained what we were made for
Out of this longing and pressure the preacher asks the question: What do we gain by all of our effort in this life?
(vs. 3)

Big Question: Why is this question of gaining something in this life worth asking?

Move 1: Because Our glory days fade (vs. 4) “Generation goes, and a generation comes.”

- a. Our Personal glory days fade
- b. Our Corporate glory days fade
- c. Death is something everyone must grapple with

Why is this question of gaining something in this life worth asking?

Move 2: Because Nature goes on without us (vs. 4b-7) the earth, the sun, the wind, the streams

When I die the sun will rise the next morning and birds will still fly, winds still blow, waves still crash against the rocky coasts. I was recently driving down Hwy 64 through Southeastern Indiana where I grew up toward Hwy 65 going north. I was suddenly overcome with the realization that the trees and farms along the hwy had been there all my life. How many times I have driven past them as a child in my parent’s or grandparent’s car, or driving my own car as a teenager and now as an adult. There used to be a man sitting out on a log on the east side of 65 who would watch the hwy and wave at the cars. For years I remember seeing that man. Now when I drive by, the trees and the land and the house are still there but not the man. We are newcomers to this earth—each generation of us. Our ability to cultivate creation is tremendous. But we cannot outlive it . . .

Why is this question of gaining something in this life worth asking?

Move 3: Because Everything wears out and leaves us unsatisfied (vs. 8, all things are full of weariness, mouth, eye, ear)

Why is this question of gaining something in this life worth asking?

Move 4: Because Is there anything that we can truly say is new? (vs. 9-10)

- Makes Sense: innovation, invention, yes the people who invent and innovate and we who consume the innovation and invention.
- They Say
- You Say
- Pause
- Move on

Why is this question of gaining something in this life worth asking?

Move 5: Because Whatever We Do Will Be Forgotten (vs. 11)

Conclusion . . .

3. Wise Instruction through Proverbs

Eccl. 7:1-14; 8:1-9; 10; 11

Preaching Ecclesiastes

“The implication for our understanding of reading the poetry of Proverbs and other portions of the Bible, is to read slowly and reflectively. As we do, we should ask, ‘how does the first part of the parallel line contribute to the idea of the second part?’⁴ What kind of “echo” do we notice?

- Synonymous
 - Static: A=B
 - Dynamic A what’s more B
- Antithetical/Contrastive A not B
- Better Than: comparisons leading to a conclusion, A is better than B because
- Preaching Help

(1) Identify the parallelism used, (2) locate verbal images, let change of images indicate the end of one point and the beginning of a new point (3) ‘explain’ each image by helping us imagine and enter the scene that each image portrays, (4) Now that we are in the scene of each image, draw out the meaning for our lives. (5) preach proverb by proverb⁵ (6) keep them within the purpose of Ecclesiastes as a whole

[1] A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.	Synonymous: A what’s more B Shocking imagery (a good name with the day of death)
[2] It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. [3] Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. [4] The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.	Better than: A is better than B because . . . Images: funeral home vs. a party Feasting, laughter, mirth vs. mourning, sadness, mourning Teaching/moral: Why is the one better than the other? Our end, true gladness, taking this seriously and living in its light
[5] It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. [6] For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity.	Better than: A is better than B because . . . Images: the rebuke of the wise vs. the song of fools Teaching/Moral through the use of simile
[7] Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart.	Dynamic Synonymous: A what’s more B Images: Oppression and Bribe vs. wise into madness, corrupted heart
[8] Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.	Contrastive: A not B Images: end of a thing, patient in spirit vs. just beginning, proud in spirit

⁴ Longman, 40.

⁵ When in the Book of Proverbs and not the book of Ecclesiastes, there are times to preach proverb by proverb and times to preach thematically instead by threading together from throughout the book, proverbs that address the same theme.

Preaching Ecclesiastes

[9] Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools	Propositional/Corrective: what not to do and why
[10] Say not, "Why were the former days better than these?" for it is not from wisdom that you ask this.	Propositional/Corrective: what not to do and why Question: (makes sense, they say, you say, pause, move on)
Etc . . .	

- Sample Sermon Clues (Ecclesiastes 7:1-13) See my Ecclesiastes 10 Sermon for full Example

Sermon 1: 7:1-6, threaded together by laughter of fools vs. wise sorrow/gladness

Sermon 2: 7:7-10, threaded together by the inner person in response to circumstances (the heart, the spirit)

Sermon 3: 7:11-12, A what is more B around the theme of wisdom and its advantages

Sermon 4: 7:13-18, threaded by theme of God, what is straight crooked, crooked straight

Conclusion: Preaching the Genres of Ecclesiastes

Wise Instruction Through:

1. Propositions
2. Questions
3. Testimony/Memoir
4. Poetic Speech
 - Parable/Story
 - Poem
 - Proverb