Faith Without Illusions: Kohelet Chapters 4-11

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LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY IN KOHELET CHAPTERS 4–11

Introduction

The heart of Kohelet's theology emerges vividly in the middle chapters of the book (chapters 4–11), which wrestle with moral confusion, the problem of evil, and the limits of human understanding. Kohelet offers neither an apologetic defense of divine justice nor a rebellious rejection of it. Instead, he articulates a response rooted in realism, humility, and disciplined joy.

The Limits of Justice and the Value of Relationships (Chapter 4)

In chapter 3, Kohelet expressed hope that God would eventually bring justice to human affairs. Yet chapter 4 opens with a stark observation: "I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun" (4:1). This is not a theoretical injustice but a persistent one. As Grossman and Abelman note, Kohelet now

confronts the painful endurance of injustice, despite belief in divine oversight.[i]

Yet even amid moral disorder, Kohelet offers pragmatic guidance. In 4:9–12, he extols the utility and emotional support of companionship—two are better than one not for sentimental reasons, but because they help each other survive. Even without eschatological guarantees, relationships provide tangible value. Cooperation is better than lonely striving or jealous competition.

Approaching God with Reverence, Not Presumption (4:17–5:6)

After chapter 4 considers earthly injustice, the next passage turns upward—warning us not to mistake prayer or religious observance for control. Kohelet's reverence for God is sober and cautious. In 4:17–5:6, he offers a rare interlude of rebuke-style exhortation. The central point is clear: don't rush to speak in the Temple, and don't make vows lightly. Fools err not because they are impious, but because they fail to grasp the infinite gulf between human and divine perspective. God is in heaven, and you are on earth—so let your words be few.

This rebuke resonates with God's answer to Job (chapters 38–41): humans are simply not equipped to understand God's design. Even the well-meaning can speak too much, pray presumptuously, and forget that mystery is not always a flaw.

Tensions Between Divine Sovereignty and Human Agency (Chapters 6–7)

Kohelet acknowledges that human beings cannot know what is good for them (6:12), nor can they predict the future. Nevertheless, in chapter 7, he pivots to a list of "better than" sayings—recognizing that while we cannot control life, some choices are wiser than others. Reflecting on mortality (7:1–4), accepting rebuke (7:5), and cultivating patience (7:8) are all better than their opposites.

The most philosophically charged passage appears in 7:13–20. Kohelet observes that the righteous sometimes perish while the wicked thrive (7:15), which seems to defy both moral intuition and the fundamental biblical theology of reward and punishment. In response, he warns: "Do not be overly righteous, and

do not be overly wise” (7:16). This statement is provocative. Several commentators (Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra) explain that excessive piety may mask pride, detachment from prophetic truth, or unhealthy asceticism. The fool thinks he can avoid sin altogether, but Kohelet reminds us: “There is no righteous person on earth who does good and never sins” (7:20).

Kohelet critiques not the pursuit of righteousness, but its absolutization—the fantasy that moral or intellectual perfection can ward off misfortune. Instead, Kohelet calls for principled realism: pursue righteousness, avoid evil, and acknowledge human fallibility. Kohelet’s realism thus challenges both excessive confidence in virtue and the illusion of moral immunity.

The closing verses of chapter 7 explore Kohelet’s quest to understand human nature and divine order. He describes his search for wisdom as elusive—“deep, deep—who can find it?” (7:24).

Kohelet resists self-righteousness. He notes: “God made humans upright, but they have sought many intrigues” (7:29). The problem is not creation, but our penchant for overreaching. We distort the straight path with excessive calculation.

On Kings, Judgment, and Human Ignorance (Chapter 8)

Kohelet turns to the social and political realm, questioning both obedience to kings and the timing of justice. His counsel is not revolutionary: obey the king (8:2–5), but understand that even wise people do not know when or how justice will come (8:6–8). Kohelet’s counsel to obey the king is not rooted in trust in human authority, but in resignation to the limits of our understanding and control. The righteous and wicked both experience outcomes that seem arbitrary, calling into question the very framework of moral causality (8:10–14).

The conclusion Kohelet reaches is not despair, but disciplined joy: “There is nothing good… but to eat and drink and rejoice” (8:15). Even without certainty, Kohelet urges us to embrace the gifts from God that are within reach.

Wisdom Amid Fragility (Chapter 9–10)

Kohelet reaffirms that wisdom is better than power—but a single sinner can destroy much good (9:18). Wisdom is precious but easily undermined by folly, injustice, or simple chance. Chapter 10 presents a sequence of proverbs about folly, echoing the format of Proverbs, yet Kohelet's tone is more skeptical. The wise man may walk uprightly, but the fool declares everything around him foolish, blind to his own folly (10:3). Social disorder, like individual folly, is not easily tamed. Unlike the optimistic moral pedagogy of Proverbs, Kohelet's proverbs often carry a note of irony, pointing to wisdom's fragility rather than its triumph. Even the wise man, though perceptive, may be undone by others—or by other circumstances beyond his control.

Having charted wisdom's vulnerability in both public and private life, Kohelet closes with a vision of spiritual maturity—joy without illusion, reverence without certainty.

Conclusion: Faith Without Illusions

In these chapters, Kohelet offers no easy solutions to moral or theological problems. Instead, he provides spiritual maturity. Justice is often delayed, and wisdom does not guarantee success. But these are not reasons to withdraw from life. On the contrary, Kohelet urges us to live well: to act thoughtfully, to fear God, to savor life's blessings without arrogance or despair.

In a world that is crooked, our goal is not to straighten it through sheer will, but to walk wisely within it—to seek understanding without demanding control, to be righteous without self-righteousness, and to rejoice without ignoring judgment.

Kohelet offers no illusions, no escape from contradiction—only the quiet dignity of a life lived wisely.

[i] Yonatan Grossman and Asael Abelman, *Kohelet: Sedek Shel Or* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2023), 100.