

The Scroll

by

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Chapter Two - Pen and Ink

Kohelet read the statement and chuckled. If he had received even one small coin for each discussion over his foundational premise that everything was *hebel*, he would be richer than the king. Many of those discussions turned to arguments, for people were quick to assume he was saying their lives were completely meaningless. Countless times he had painstakingly explained that his teaching was not about finding meaning but rather how to enjoy all the good things life had to offer in the moment instead of hoping for some future reward for all their hard work. His listeners often responded with blank looks but sometimes with anger for his words were a direct assault on their ambitions, their dreams of one day gaining security by working just a little harder or smarter.

He dipped his pen into the ink. Lurking behind his opening statement was a question every human had asked, whether they would admit it or not. He touched the nib to the scroll and carefully scratched out the question he had voiced a thousand times, both to himself and to those he sought to teach in the way of the wise:

What do we gain from all the labor at which we toil under the sun?

The question always generated a quick response. Most pointed to their possessions or their dreams—a better house, a new horse, a bigger market stall. There was no end to things people toiled to achieve and no denying their honest belief that they had gained something substantial in life. But he had observed human labor from every vantage point and had concluded that gaining something truly lasting from work was simply not possible.

He reread his theme question. The word he had used for *gain* was *yithron*, a marketplace word everyone was well acquainted with. *Yithron* described the amount left over after all the expenses had been paid. Though it was a business principle, it was also

how people viewed their purpose in life. They believed that if they made an extra coin each day, their lives were moving forward and they were getting ahead. The growing pile of coins proved that their hard work had provided a lasting benefit. Life would be better tomorrow and their future would be secure. The pursuit of *yithron* got them up each day to chase the dream, but they could not see that the pursuit was just a vapor— *hebel*—an ongoing exercise in futility.

The shaft of light from the rising sun crept closer to his jar of ink. Like a sundial, the new day was being marked and spent. The relentless passing of time was the driving force behind all human need to get ahead in life. Everyone wanted to believe that what he or she was doing was worthwhile, for people were investing their very lives into that pursuit.

He scratched another remnant of the previous writer's work from the scroll. Each generation since the beginning of time had tried to make its mark on the world, but to no avail; the endless cycles of nature would always rub away whatever they thought they had left behind.

The words of an obscure poem said it best. He dipped the pen into the ink and carefully formed the words.

A generation comes and a generation goes, but the earth is not changed.
The sun rises, the sun sets, then hurries back to where it rises again. The
wind blows to the south, then turns to the north. Round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course. The streams flow to the sea, yet the sea is
never full. To the place the streams came from, there they return again.
Everything goes on in endless cycles.

Kohelet stopped writing and leaned back in his chair. He had read those lines many times in the king's library, but it wasn't until he was free of those walls and had time to walk about in the hills that the ongoing cycles of nature and the permanence of the earth had finally hit home. In the city, with all the recent construction projects, it appeared that mankind was winning. The effects of atrophy were continually covered with new paint and the gleam of gold covered the more base materials below. City dwellers found it easier to believe that mankind was making a monumental mark on the

world; that they were marching together into a glorious future. But out in the countryside he had walked over the ruins of ancient cities, now just mounds of weed-covered debris. Nature always won in the end. No matter how hard people worked, all their achievements would someday return to the earth. “Dust to dust” was more than a personal journey of cradle to corpse; it was the story of everything human.

The sunlight crept over the lip of the ink jar, its rays reflecting sharply off the glistening black pool. The jar contained enough ink to fill a hundred scrolls, yet there would always be more words. People were constantly chattering about “new” events and ideas. They discussed what was happening in the city, across the nation, and in distant lands. The old men referred to former days and how much the world had changed. The young talked eagerly about new ways of doing things, about inventions that could change how people worked and make their lives better. Everyone talked on and on as though to convince each other that humanity was actually moving forward, but the essential nature of human existence under the sun was not changing. The fundamental principles remained constant no matter how much everyone talked about new things.

Kohelet touched his pen to the ink, scattering the sun’s reflection around the room.

Everything goes on in endless cycles, yet our mouths never tire of speaking, our eyes never finish looking, and our ears never get their fill of listening. How we live and work under the sun does not change and although people say, “things are different now,” it was this way long before we were born. We have forgotten what happened before our time, and in the future, the memory of what is taking place now will also vanish.

He put the pen down and shook out his cramped hand. His opening statement that all was futile had dried in the light that slanted across the scroll. The shiny strokes that formed the word for futility had already lost their luster. That was as quickly as life changed, as quickly as his career in the palace had come to an end. He leaned forward to look out the window. He had made sure the palace was not in clear view from his desk for although he had made peace with those painful memories, he didn’t need the constant reminder of just how quickly people would forget you and move on.

The door creaked. Kohelet pushed back from the desk. Benjamin had finally arrived with breakfast, but the scroll could not be rolled away with the ink still wet. He heard the wide smile on Benjamin's face as the deep voice spoke over his shoulder.

"So you have finally begun."

Kohelet pushed the scroll back on the table to make room for Benjamin to set down the bowl. "I had to do something with breakfast coming so late every morning."

Benjamin ignored the jibe. "Be careful, master. Don't smear your work. Your letters are beautifully formed. You have not lost your touch."

Kohelet had long since given up on telling Benjamin to quit calling him master. The title was from when Benjamin had first come to the library as a slave to move the heavy clay tablets arriving daily from the four corners of the world. In those days he had been Benjamin's master, but down here they were equals—or maybe not, for by giving in to Benjamin's badgering about the scroll the tables had turned and it appeared that Benjamin was now in charge.

A large, ebony hand set a steaming bowl on the front edge of the desk. Benjamin was the largest man Kohelet had ever met. Originally from the upper reaches of the Nile, he was an Ethiopian with skin almost as dark as Kohelet's ink. His wide face was pleasant and his smile contagious. He had been brought to Jerusalem as a slave from Egypt to join the king's elite bodyguard, but Benjamin was a gentle giant. When they could not train him for combat, he ended up serving as muscle for the heavy lifting required in the library.

Benjamin gingerly picked up the scroll, his hands dwarfing the wooden rollers. His smile broadened further, and he angled toward the window.

"May I read it?"

Kohelet nodded. When he had taught Ben to read, he had opened a door in Benjamin's life and the young man had charged through it. The slave had become a voracious reader. At times he would go missing in the archives, and Kohelet would find him bent over the scroll he had been sent to fetch, his face deeply furrowed in concentration. Unfortunately Benjamin's passion for scrolls had not gone unnoticed by Daniel, Kohelet's apprentice librarian. Kohelet's jaw tightened at the recollection. He had been too trusting of Daniel and had failed to see how the man was positioning himself to

forcibly take over the library. Daniel had used Benjamin's love of scrolls to spring his trap and force a quick decision from the court regarding both Benjamin and Kohelet. Recalling the devious speed of those events still angered him. All it took was a missing Genesis scroll, a summary investigation by the palace guard and suddenly both he and Benjamin were running for their very lives.

Benjamin spoke from behind the scroll, the shadow of his shaved head falling on its translucent skin. "This is a great beginning, master; it captures your teaching well, but you must also tell the readers why they should trust you. They need to know you have read all the wisdom books in the world. Truly you are as wise as the king since you have read everything he has read."

"Then maybe he should write it for me."

Benjamin peered over the scroll. "Or you should write it for him."

Kohelet paused, a spoonful of porridge in midair. "What do you mean?"

"Master, we both know of wisdom books where the author took on a different personality, an established vantage point from which to state his case."

"Yes, but from the king's viewpoint? That seems a little rash, given our recent history in the palace."

Ben raised his eyebrows. "But you are the only one who can speak about all the work the king has done, his great projects, his incredible wealth, his parties, and his many wives. There is nobody who could write from his viewpoint as well as you. And since it would be well written, the king could only be flattered if people thought it was him doing the writing."

Kohelet let the spoon of porridge drop back into the bowl. Viewing the world through the eyes of a prominent personality as the path of wisdom was explored *was* a literary device various wisdom writers had used. His advantage was that he understood the world from both life in the palace and the perspective of the common folk in the marketplace. He knew without a doubt that the question "What do I gain from all my hard work?" was a cry from every heart, from every time and place since creation. Writing from his own experience of poverty and disadvantage but implying a royal position of wealth and power would guarantee a wider audience. It would be a great

platform for his message. He motioned for Benjamin to bring the scroll back to the table and pushed the bowl aside.

Benjamin spread the scroll before him and weighted it down with two smooth stones. Kohelet stared at it. A sentence formed in his mind; he hesitated, glancing up to catch Benjamin's hopeful grin.

Kohelet swept up his pen and immersed it in the ink.