

# The Scroll

by

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## Chapter Three – Beginnings

I, Kohelet, ruled over Israel in Jerusalem, and I devoted myself to study and explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

Benjamin gave a soft grunt of affirmation as he slipped the bowl from the table. The door eased shut, and Kohelet read the sentence aloud to the empty room. His voice tapered off as he realized anyone below the window might hear the words. It was a bold statement but mostly true. As the chief collector and archivist of the king's library, he had devoted his entire life to the study of wisdom. Indeed he had read more books than the king, for the ruler often was too busy with matters of state, building projects, and his many wives to reflect on the ancient texts.

But the days of having the best writers of all time at his fingertips were long gone. Now his entire library was housed in the cracked leather bucket that hung from an iron hook above his desk. Inside the bucket, safe from the rodents that scurried about the apartment at night, were three precious scrolls. More accurately, two and a half, for much of the Genesis scroll had been burned away. Only Benjamin's quick reaction had saved it from complete ruin—a noble act but one with dire consequences.

The charred end of the Genesis scroll's wooden roller stuck out of the bucket like an invitation, but Kohelet had long since memorized every word of the fragile parchment, right up to the account of Abraham leaving his homeland, which was where the scroll now ended.

Like many ancient scrolls, *Genesis* took its name from the opening word in the text—*bereshith*, “the beginning.” For Kohelet, this scroll was the fountainhead of all wisdom. Like the rivers that flowed from the Garden of Eden, wisdom flowed from the creation of mankind.

His ongoing meditations on the first half of Genesis had deeply influenced his teachings on the path of wisdom, especially his understanding of human endeavor. It was in the beginning that mankind had received a mandate to work the earth, to tend it and enjoy the fruits of their labors. From that point on, every human heart beat with desire to make something of the dust of the earth—to grow a plant, carve a tree into a useful object, bring a fish to market, or press grapes into wine.

Humanity had been intrinsically bound to the earth, but then God had twisted the world beyond the capacity of the human race to repair it. The initial desire to work the earth now ran headlong into the reality of the thorns and thistles that plagued creation. Humans were trapped between working to move their affairs forward yet finding themselves constantly thwarted by problems. As a result, everyone was trying to use the earth's limited resources to compete with others, to climb higher and make a name for himself. But life under the sun, as Kohelet now knew as never before, could not provide the satisfaction of getting ahead.

As Kohelet leaned forward to touch his pen to the ink, a sharp ache in his back pushed a low groan from his lips. It was a fitting sound for the words he painstakingly scratched onto the vellum.

What a frustrating task God has given to mankind! I have examined everything people work at under the sun and it is all as futile as chasing the wind, for we could never straighten everything that is twisted, nor could we even begin to count all that is lacking.

As he gingerly relaxed back into his chair, the morning breeze slipped through the open window and ruffled the edge of the scroll. "Chasing after the wind" had become his favorite metaphor for the futility of all work. Anyone who had spent a summer in the scorching heat of Jerusalem could relate to that image. Going out to the hills to capture a cool breeze and bring it home was indeed as futile as going to work and expecting to gain something of lasting benefit. No thinking person could deny that despite one's best efforts, human achievement always ended up twisted and lacking. No sooner was something constructed than it required a continual commitment of time and energy just to

keep it in a decent state of repair. The thorns and thistles of a cursed earth were not just for those working the fields; problems and shortages overran every occupation.

Kohelet rubbed away the deep creases that had set in across his forehead. Even his chosen field of education was subject to futility. He had devoted his entire life to the pursuit of knowledge, fully believing that he would come to a complete understanding of how the world worked if he just studied long and hard enough. But all he had discovered, after a lifetime of pursuing knowledge, was just how little he actually knew for certain. By setting up knowledge as a goal unto itself, he had also set himself up for a great disappointment. All he had been left with was a growing sense of being adrift in the world without a shred of certainty to guide him. That bleak realization followed him like a twilight shadow, lengthening in the growing darkness of his passing years. He began to write and the scratching of the pen on parchment was like scraping at an old wound.

Even though I acquired more wisdom than anyone who had ever ruled in Jerusalem, when I applied myself to a complete understanding of wisdom and knowledge, I discovered I too was chasing after the wind, for with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

*Grief.* The anguish of the word flowed from his heart, through his cramped hand, and onto the scroll. People had inflicted terrible atrocities on others throughout the history of the world. The soil of the earth was drenched in the blood of the innocents. It was no wonder that the land constantly sprouted thorns and thistles.

An explosion of sound from across the plaza almost caused him to drop his pen. Caleb was shouting at his wife and making a grand fuss. Once again he had stayed up late into the night, drinking like a fish and now he was in one of his foul moods. Caleb was a man with more ideas than good sense. Every attempt at a new business always failed and then he would seek solace in wine but that didn't help matters.

Kohelet could relate to feelings of failure and the need to bury those unpleasant feelings with more pleasurable distractions. It had been during a period of increasing disillusionment with the pursuit of wisdom that he had tried to recapture his lost youth. He had set aside his books and set out to experience the pleasures of life. Stepping from

the dim recesses of the library archives, he had turned his natural curiosity to exploring the social life of the court. He had cautiously approached the people and parties he had formerly viewed with disdain to investigate what they might provide. Much to his surprise, the courtiers welcomed him with open arms for they found in him an interesting diversion from their normal social fare. He lent their parties a new intellectual status and he quickly became one of the most sought-after guests at events within and without the palace walls. A man of literature was in their midst, someone who could tell them of the distant past and of new ideas from far-off lands.

He allowed himself a bemused smile for they did not know he had never traveled more than two days' journey from Jerusalem. He had not even dipped his toe in the seas that brought his precious scrolls and tablets to him.

The experience in palace life went to his head like the wine that flowed in the king's courts. Women who had never noticed him in the past—charming, passionate, and beautiful women—sought him out. But the novelty of it all had faded as quickly as the effects of the wine, for he simply could not shut off his mind and follow the revelers down pathways that could not satisfy his quest. He could see there was no lasting gain in the pursuit of pleasure, any more there was in the pursuit of wisdom. His sense of alienation slowly returned, and he had already lost his taste for their parties and was daydreaming about his scrolls when he met Mariah. That was an entirely new exploration of life's pleasures, and also its heartaches.

He pulled his thoughts from the past and found himself chewing on the tip of his pen. A bitter taste to go with even more bitter memories. He wiped the saliva on his sleeve. Mariah and their ill-fated relationship—he bit his lip—were best left out of this scroll, at least for now. A simple summary of those fleeting days, along with his conclusions, would suffice.

So I decided to try pleasure to see what it might do for me. With wisdom as my guide, I tested the effects of wine and embraced folly, but that also proved unsuccessful. Pleasure, I said, is futile, for it does not provide anything of lasting benefit.

Lasting benefit spoke directly to the heart of the matter, for although the parties were enjoyable in the moment, they could not provide anything of value that would carry over into a new day. The pursuit of pleasure could not answer his question about what people could gain from all their labor. Joy was found in the journey but failed as a destination. Those who chased after pleasure were grinding at a wheel that would spin endlessly until the day they died.

His investigation into the pleasures of life came to a complete end at the same time that the king announced a major building campaign at the palace. The library was to be moved to make room for a new bathhouse for the king's wives, and much to Daniel's irritation, Kohelet was given the task of designing and overseeing the building of a new library. His need to forget Mariah drove him forward, and he researched other great libraries and worked together with the craftsmen who would build according to his exact specifications.

In the end it was one of the most enjoyable times of his life. Exchanging the world of clay tablets and parchment for building blocks and timbers opened his eyes to the pleasure of creating something that had not existed before. The thrill of drawing a design on paper and seeing it grow into a solid reality quickly became addictive. Sleep felt like a waste of time, and he greeted each morning with eager anticipation.

He enjoyed observing the creativity and talent others brought to their work. Through his ongoing interactions with the laborers and craftsmen working on the project, he discovered that even for the peasant who strove to feed his family, a pride of craftsmanship still went into the making of a fishing net or the weaving of a basket. For those higher up the social ladder, the creative drive turned to art or architecture, and the latest king certainly was no exception. Since his coming to the throne, the palace and the city were in constant flow of building projects. Monuments previous kings had erected in their own memory were torn down to make room for those commemorating the new king. Kohelet chuckled. At times the great leaders of the human race acted more like dogs marking their territory than noble rulers leading their people.

But kings weren't the only ones who competed with each other. A peasant's house was humble, yet it was also built in hopes of extending his influence beyond the span of a lifetime. Everyone worked within the knowledge that his days were quickly

dwindling away. Truly the shadow of death pushed all people forward, but by writing as the king, he could demonstrate that this drive to achieve something worthwhile was a universal human issue with a common result, no matter how rich someone was.

I was determined to do something worthwhile with the few days of life I was granted on the earth, so I went to work on many great projects. I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I created gardens and parks full of fruit trees, and dug wells so my orchards would flourish. I acquired male and female servants and had others who were born in my house. I owned more cattle and sheep than anyone in Jerusalem. I amassed silver and gold and collected royal treasures from far-off lands. I enjoyed parties, music and the company of beautiful women.

I became greater than anyone who had ever lived in Jerusalem. With wisdom at my side, I denied myself nothing my eyes desired and refused my heart no pleasure. Yet when I looked back over all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, it was as futile as chasing after the wind, for I had gained nothing of lasting benefit under the sun. The only reward for all my labor was the joy my heart found while I was working.

Kohelet pushed back from the scroll. People could find great joy in their work but the satisfaction did not last. At the palace a great celebration was always held after a project was completed, but those enjoying the feast knew they were closing a door that could never be opened again. They could look back with fondness on what had been achieved, but the pleasure of working together on that task could not be lived again. When the sun rose the next day, a new project had to be found so they could once again enjoy the daily rewards of their efforts.

A burst of noise from the marketplace shot through the window. A dog barked furiously, then someone laughed and called out across the plaza. Eli's fruit cart had collapsed, and Kohelet could hear people telling Eli yet again that if he fixed it properly, this wouldn't keep happening.

Kohelet smiled at the familiar voices. He had been concentrating so hard on the task at hand that he had not heard the sound of the market coming to life below his window. It was time to embrace the new day, time to get out there and earn his daily bread. The scroll could dry until Benjamin returned to roll it up and store it in the bucket.