

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 42

Ecclesiastes

All is Vanity?

On Thursday night, I was attending a dinner and reception for a large group of lawyers and certain noteworthy guests. One of the guests was a renowned physician whom I know quite well. This gentleman in his late 50's ("David"), while Jewish by birth, is an avowed atheist who has never believed in God. He walked up to me while I was visiting with two dear friends, Randy and Rhonda Lowery. Randy is a lawyer who currently is President of Lipscomb University, a Christian school in Nashville. Rhonda, his wife, teaches in the Lipscomb Bible department. Both make trying to live in God's plan the top priority in their lives.

When David joined our group, I made the introductions so each knew enough about the other for continued conversation. About David, I informed the Lowerys of his insistent belief that there is no God. David openly added some reasons for his disbelief as well as some childhood reflections that gave some historical focus to the subject. I then had a chance to tell of David's impressive devotion to seeing to medical education for those who serve the poor and underprivileged in third world countries. David set up and oversees a non-profit organization focused on global health, education and training services.

As this discussion evolved, you could see a lawyer's inquisitive light form in Randy's eyes as he politely pressed David on a core issue. "Why do you do these good deeds?" Randy asked. David was a bit taken back by the question as if it were nonsensical. "Because the poor and underprivileged rarely have someone stand up for them," he responded.

Randy did not push too far, but his point was not lost on me. How does one chart what is good and worthwhile if there is no God to orient our compass and give meaning to our pursuits? Randy was a debater in high school in the 70's, and most every high school debater from then was aware of Thomas Malthus. In the late 1800's, Malthus theorized that true compassion would let third world people starve, for every life you save today would, he reasoned, result in ten deaths down the road. Food supply could not keep up with population growth, so the compassionate thing was determined to be letting the current population starve to death to save tenfold lives in the future.

Now, this thinking flies in the face of what is commonly thought "right" or "good," yet without an adequate measuring rod to define "good," who is to say? For that matter, if there is no God, then what "virtue" is there in doing well to

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others when those others are in *no position to do good back to you*? What is the reason for doing anything beyond securing your own enjoyment in life and that of others you care about? Does not that (and most any other activity) seem to be vain and without real profit?

These questions and issues are not new. They are ones that have probed the thoughts of people going back at least 2500 years. In the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, we have a reference to life's vanity and futility for matters "under the sun." The phrase "under the sun," with its related idea of seeing things from an earthly perspective, occurs 29 times in the 12 short chapters of Ecclesiastes. It is one of a number of recurrent words and phrases that form this interesting commentary on life. The word used most in the book is *hevel*, meaning "vanity" or, more literally, "vapor, whiff, or puff." This word occurs 38 times, and it is here we start our study!

ECCLESIASTES

As we consider Ecclesiastes, we quickly notice the difficulty of finding an easily outlined structure. Although we attempt to break out sections below as an aide to analysis, the writing seems to rotate themes, rather than follow a 21st century Western outline. We might liken it to a flower arrangement with repeated themes that make a beautiful whole, even if not laid out in a 1, 2, 3, A, B, C form.

Beginning and theme (1:1-2)

*The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
Vanity of vanity, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

With these words, the "Preacher" begins his writing we call "Ecclesiastes." As we are introduced to this book, we might think we are reading the words of King Solomon. After all, this is a "wisdom" book, Solomon was the "wise" king, and he was "the son of David." We cannot assume this is the writing of Solomon, however. There are some good indications that the writing is after his time, both in vocabulary used (there are some words that are "borrowed" from the Persian language which was a time several hundred years after Solomon) and in content (Solomon or another king would likely not be complaining about the injustice of society. As king, they would act on it!). The "son of David" label applied to all of David's descendants, even Joseph the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus (Matt. 1:20). The idea of this being the words of the "king in Jerusalem" could also be a tribute to such wisdom of Solomon or another wise king. Of course, we also cannot eliminate Solomon as an author, at least of a portion of the writing. Even loan words from Persian could be later editorship of others, or the application of Solomon's words to a later situation.

One realistic possibility is that Solomon was an originator of the idea that “all is vanity” or something similar. Those words of Solomon become the resounding theme that is carried throughout the book by the writer called in the English Standard Version the “Preacher.” In a related sense, in chapter two, the Preacher seems to call upon the experiences and conclusions of Solomon as the wisest and richest of Israel’s king, expressing the conclusions of Solomon as to the vanity of life.

“Preacher” is a translation of a Hebrew word *Qoheleth*. The word is related to term for “assembly” and is likely a leader in the assembly or perhaps is a personal name. Some scholars will call the book and its author simply *Qoheleth*. When the Jews were translating their Scriptures into Greek (the “Septuagint” or “LXX”) they translated this term into the Greek for “assembly,” *ekklesiastes*, from which the Latin translation called the writing, *Liber Ecclesiastes*. From this we get our title, but it sends us a bit away from the original idea. Suffice it to say the author was either the assembly’s leader (hence “preacher”) or was named *Qoheleth* meaning capital “P” “Preacher.”

The words of the Preacher (or Solomon) are profound: vanity of vanities, all is vanity! This theme is constant throughout the book. The book begins with it, and ends with it (12:8 “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.”) In fact, the word “vanity” is used 38 times in these short 12 chapters. That is more than half of its usage in the entire Old Testament. The Hebrew word translated “vanity” is *hevel* (הֶבֶל). It literally means a “warm breath” or “vapor.”¹ Precisely what *hevel* means in this book is troublesome for scholars. The ESV, the New Revised Standard Version, and the New American Standard version keep the King James choice and translate it as “vanity.” The NIV, the New Living Version and others translate it as “meaningless.” The Amplified Bible uses two words “vapor” and “futile,” while the Common English Bible states, “Perfectly pointless...Everything is pointless.” The struggle to wrap into one English word the idea conveyed in the Hebrew has led at least one scholar to call for us to incorporate *hevel* into English using it instead of a translation!²

We can best get the idea of *hevel* by reading through Ecclesiastes! As in a flower arrangement, we see the careful placement of *hevel* in ways that evoke a picture of meaninglessness, of vexation over the limitations of life, of frustration over life’s unfairness, and over the unfixable problem of death. The writer begins to tell us the futility, the wispy vapor, of life in the next set of verses.

¹ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M., & Stamm, J. J., *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament* (Brill 1999).

² Garrett, D. A. (2001). *Vol. 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of songs, The New American Commentary*, (Broadman & Holman 2001).

A Catalogue of *Hevel* (1:3-2:26)

Hevel in the Natural World.

Over the next set of verses, the Preacher notes the vanity of life “under the sun” (1:3). This phrase “under the sun” will get repeated use in this book. It is the perspective of the world from a human view, from where man dwells. It is not God’s view from above the heavens; it is the contrasting human view of life. In this area, there is a constant pattern that occurs: Things happen over and over. There is no ultimate accomplishment, nor is there anything new. The same thing goes on over and over. The Preacher calls you to think about it: Man works, but eventually dies and another generation comes in and works. Then that generation dies and another comes in and works. No generation finishes the work of man, nor does any generation last (1:3-4).

The same is true of the sun. It rises and sets, only to do it again and again, day in and day out. It never accomplishes anything permanent where it no longer needs to cycle through rising and setting (1:5). So also the wind—it blows south then blows north. Over and over, it blows through its circuits. It never “finishes.” (1:6). Streams run to the sea, but never fill it up. They just keep flowing (1:7). The eye never reaches a point where it has seen all that is needed, or the ear hear all that is to be heard. Both just keep at it, never being satisfied (1:8).

The Preacher concludes the natural world as something that is on constant repeat. The same things happen over and over again:

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.
Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?
It has been already
in the ages before us (1:9-10).

Hevel in the world of wisdom and knowledge

The Preacher then sets out to give his assessment as “king over Israel in Jerusalem”³ who applied his heart to searching out wisdom (1:12-13). In searching out the wisdom “under the heavens” (1:13) and the things done “under

³ Some scholars see here a direct reference that mandates Solomon as author. Others see this as a writing from the perspective of Solomon or some other king noting the difficulty of understanding other passages if in fact Solomon were the author. See the discussion by Seow, Choon-Leong, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation and Commentary, The Anchor Bible Series*, v. 18C (Doubleday 1997), at 37ff.

the sun” (1:14), even from the perspective of a king, it is all “vanity [*hevel*] and a striving after wind” (1:14). There is no way to fix all that is broken, and no way to count all that is lacking (1:15). With the greatest wisdom and knowledge comes sorrow and vexation (1:18), for one learns that life is not pain free and without difficulty. In fact the opposite is true. Wisdom shows that “It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with” (1:13), or so it seems “under the sun”!

Hevel in Personal Life

The king experienced everything he could in an effort to find something beyond the vanity or *hevel* of life. He tried pleasure and enjoyment, but found it vanity. Laughter brought no real meaning or use. Wine did not produce real significance, nor did the busy chores of life (2:1-3). In a series of passages that sound like a hamster running on a wheel, fast and furious with no real results, the Preacher as king built houses, planted vineyards, made gardens and parks, planted orchards, and set up irrigation systems (2:4-6). In addition to these accomplishments, the king had great possession: slaves, herds, flocks, silver, gold, foreign treasures, singers, and concubines (2:7-8). This king exceeded in fame and fortune all who ever came before him, and had all his eyes could see, but looking at it, he saw it all as vanity [*hevel*]:

Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun (2:11).

More Hevel in Wisdom

The Preacher recognized that wisdom was a virtue. At least a wise person walks with his eyes open, as compared to the fool. Yet both the wise man and the fool ultimately die. Even in life, both often experience the same events. It is not as if wisdom gives one escape from the end of life “under the sun” and so the Preacher “hated life...for all is vanity [*hevel*] and a striving after wind” (2:12-17).

The Hevel of Working

As the Preacher brings to a close his first set of teachings on the vanity of life, he goes into a discourse on “toil under the sun” (2:18). This is not something that anyone can keep. After death, even the best of man’s achievements and accomplishments go on to another. The succeeding generations may prove to be wise or may turn out foolish; there is no way to determine or any guarantees. Work is tough and vexing (hence it is called “work” or “toil”) and can tax a

person, even as they worry over it all night. Thinking about this brought despair to the Preacher (2:19-20).

Yet, the Preacher does not end this section on vanity without giving some perspective beyond that of life “under the sun.” The Preacher does realize that from the hand of God can come enjoyment, wisdom, and knowledge to those who seek to please God in life. In this way, while all seems vanity under the sun, the best seems to be eating and drinking and finding enjoyment in work (2:24-26).

Likely because passages like this advocate finding some level of joy in eating and drinking, this book became one that rabbis traditionally read during the festival of Sukkot.

“Ecclesiastes was read during Sukkot... Ecclesiastes may have been associated with Sukkot because of the calls for enjoyment in the book. The feast of Sukkot is known in liturgy as *zeman simhatenu* ‘the season of our rejoicing.’”⁴

After this section on vanity, the Preacher addresses his subjects with a poem about timing.

A Poem and Comments About Time (3:1-22)

In 1965, the folk rock group The Byrds hit number one on the charts with the song *Turn! Turn! Turn! (to Everything There is a Season)*. Of course, The Byrds did not write the song, for it was copyrighted and first recorded by Pete Seeger in 1959. Even Pete Seeger did not write the entire song, however. He took the words (all but six) straight out of the 1611 version of the King James Bible (although he did change up the order of the words a bit).⁵ Seeger took the words from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, a time to reap that which is planted;
A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

⁴ Seow at 5.

⁵ Old Testament scholar John Monson is fond of teaching his students that the song from the 1960’s that best epitomizes the theme of angst in Ecclesiastes is not Pete Seeger’s *Turn! Turn! Turn!*, but is *I Can’t Get No Satisfaction* by the Rolling Stones!

A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

For at least ten years, Seeger donated 45% of the royalties on this song to a non-profit in Israel. (He arrived at the 45% because he wrote the music, which he figured was 50% and then added the echoing words “turn, turn turn” which he considered to be 5% of the song!)⁶

This passage is a poetic recognition that everything cycles in its time “under the heaven.” After writing it, the Preacher comments on it in ways that should eclipse the fame of the song!

The Preacher notes that this timing of events is a reflection of God’s hand at work. “He has made everything beautiful in its time” (3:11). God has done this from the beginning of time and keeps it secure until the end. This eternity is something that man can consider in his heart, but man cannot understand. In this sense, man can be part of the cycle and seek to enjoy God and his gifts in man’s day, but man will not fathom the depths of God’s eternity (3:11-15).

Seow writes,

The deity has imbued humanity with a recognition of the eternal (*‘olam*)—that which is not limited by time—but mortals can only respond moment by moment.⁷

Part of this response of man, should be to fear God. He is not under the sun, but is the one who placed the sun in its time and season! (3:14).

In contrast to God’s role, the actions of man seem almost perverse. For example, justice does not seem to be consistently seen in life “under the sun.” In place of justice or righteousness, one often found wickedness. While the Preacher thought that God’s judgment would make things right, under the sun he saw that all men eventually just die, like any beast of the field. In that sense, man is a mere animal, and his life and death are vanity [*hevel*].

A Set of “Better-Than” Sayings (4:1-16)

The Preacher is able to set out in this section a set of “better than” statements that seem to indicate there is merit and good in some actions as against others. Yet even as there is something better, it still does not merit any title beyond “vanity”. So starting with the presence of oppression, the Preacher notes the futility for all.

⁶ <http://www.haaretz.com/news/pete-seeger-s-role-in-ending-israeli-house-demolitions-1.4618>.

⁷ Seow, at 49.

The oppressed get no real comfort. Similarly, while the oppressors have power, they have no real comfort either! This draws the Preacher to the conclusion that the dead are better off than the living and the unborn are best off yet as they have never seen evil at all. This is his assessment “under the sun” (4:3).

An idle fool is symbolic cannibalism. The fool devours himself rather than work (4:5). Yet even those working are striving after wind and are often better served by quietness rather than industry (4:6). Then the Preacher speaks of those who work extra hard, but by themselves. They have no one to share riches with, are never satisfied with what they have, but always need more. The Preacher notes that they never pause to ask, “Why am I doing this?”! “This also is vanity and an unhappy business (5:7-8). This brings another “better than statement.” Two working together are better than one. They can help each other when one falls, and can bring profit to each other. Two can also stand up against an adversary better than one (and three is even better than two!).

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken (4:9-12).

In the last better-than saying the Preacher comments on a poor, yet wise youth who left prison and rose to prominence. The Preacher compared such a youth to an old king that would not listen to the advice of others. This king gave up his place to the youth. “Better was a poor and wise youth” (4:13). Yet even such a meteoric rise was nothing in eternal value. It too was “vanity [*hevel*] and a striving after wind” (4:16).

An Admonition to Fear God (5:1-7)

In chapter five, we enter into a new phase of the Preacher’s writing. The earlier part of Ecclesiastes was written in mainly descriptive language. With chapter five, the Preacher begins using predominantly direct command and exhortation. This shows a move from reflection on how life was, to the ethics of how one should live. The beginning place of this section is the instruction to live one’s life right before God.

The fact that life is filled with the vain pursuit of empty dreams should drive one to fear and worship the God above the heavens and sun. Just as God set out the seasons and heavens in the poetic discourse of 3:1-8, the Preacher recognizes that God is worthy of a human response that rises above the vanity of life.

So one should guard one's steps in approaching God. Sacrifices are not simply rituals, but are opportunities. God is not an object of our idle chatter, but first and foremost is one we should listen to. Vows to God are not what we should be making, and when we do, we better take them seriously. To do less, is to take God less than seriously. This at least is living beyond the simple vanity of most (5:7).

A Chiasm on Life under the Sun (5:8-6:9)

In this passage, the Preacher returns to his theme of vanity, exploring the vanity of wealth and honor. People are to find the limit between enjoying themselves and greed. The Preacher sets this section up as a chiasm, where the first and last sections echo each other, pointing to the center section as the emphasis. (See earlier lessons on chiasms⁸).

In 5:8-12, he writes of those who cannot be “satisfied with money.”⁹ This matches with 6:7-9, which speaks of those whose “appetite is not satisfied.” In 5:13-17 the Preacher explores the evil of those who cannot enjoy what they have, but eat “in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.” This sets up chiastically with 6:3-6 where one is “not satisfied with life's good things.” In 5:18-19 we read of life as a lot given by God, along with the wealth, possessions and power to enjoy them. In 6:1-2 we read the counter of those “to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, yet no power to enjoy them.

⁸ Lessons are available at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. The Old Testament lessons beginning with Babel explain chiasms. (See also the lesson on Judges, etc.)

⁹ 5:12 is a favorite verse. It speaks of the laborer who sleeps sweetly, whether he has eaten or not. Yet the rich man does not sleep well, either because of over-consumption of food (indigestion) or over-consumption of wealth (worry over money)!

A – Not satisfied with money (5:8-12)

B – Evil and can't enjoy life (5:13-17)

C – Life as God's gift (5:18-19)

D – Don't brood over life, live in God's joy (5:20)

C – Life as God's gift (5:18-19)

B – Evil and can't enjoy life (5:13-17)

A – Not satisfied with money (5:8-12)

This chiasm sets up 5:20 as the key focus verse. The English Standard Version gives that verse as, "For he [the one to whom God gives much] will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart." This passage is written with a Hebrew structure that can be considered a "negative injunction." In other words, the passage is not stating the fact that one who has much does not remember or think of his days. Rather, this passage is saying that one should *not* "much remember the days of his life." *The point of this is that one should not spend too much energy dwelling on the past or the future such that they fail to appreciate where God has placed them in the present!*

Wisdom of Life under the Sun (6:10-12:7)

The Preacher then turns to giving words of wisdom for those living "under the sun" (6:12). These words echo Proverbs in the way they teach wisdom and the avoidance of folly. Hence, one should seek a good name for it "is better than precious ointment" (7:1). It is "better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools" (7:5). "The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit" (7:8), yet another proverb of wisdom for life under the sun is, "Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools" (7:9).

Combined with these affirmations of wise living are some observations on life. In these, the Preacher sets out experiences that do not make sense by man's rules of fairness. There are those who are righteous and perish in their righteousness while wicked men seem to live on (the ancient equivalent to the modern maxim, "only the good die young"). The Preacher has noted the power of wisdom in

strengthening the wise. He also noted that no one is truly righteous in a perfect sense:

Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins (7:20).

Another practical note of wisdom living concerns listening to those who speak poorly of you: *DON'T!* People will speak poorly of others. You have done it, I have done it, and everyone does it. Now that does not mean we should do it, but merely that everyone does at some time or another. The Preacher says not to take it to heart when others speak poorly of you (7:21-22). These maxims the Preacher has tested in life, and they bear his wise stamp of approval, yet even as he has sought such wisdom, has applied it personally, and has taught it to others, it is still life under the sun! This wisdom serves only to reinforce that the heart of man's problem is the sin that envelops all people (7:29).

Life "under the sun" should prompt one to honor the king and his command (8:1-9). The wicked seem to get respect, even meriting a good burial. They escape from rapid justice and live extra long lives doing evil, yet the Preacher knows that the wicked man who does not fear God does not have the same quality of life as the man who fears God (8:10-13).

Still, on earth (and under the sun) there is a vanity [*hevel*] that happens often where the righteous seem to suffer as the wicked should, while the wicked get the blessings of the righteous. There are not good answers to this for the Preacher. He knows nothing beyond enjoying what God has put in your life, even as life seems unfair (8:14-17). This is not the only evil result of life. Both the righteous and the wicked will die. This is a common end that all people face:

This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all (9:3).

This common end, however, should not stop us from living right today. Part of that right living includes enjoying what God has given you. This becomes a matter of perspective. We should see God's gifts as gifts, and enjoy them as such. Even the work he has given us to do is a joy if we see it as a gift from him. With this attitude we can:

- "Eat your bread with joy" (9:7).
- "Drink your wine with a merry heart" (9:7).
- Enjoy even the simplicity of clean clothes and dressing ("Let your garments always be white. Let not oil be lacking on your head" (9:8).).

- “Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun” (9:9).
- “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might” (9:10).

Life is not always fair. The swift ones do not always win the race, nor do the strong always win the battle. Time and chance seem to do their worst indiscriminately (9:11-12). But this view of life “under the sun” is not what dictates how we live! We are to seek to live wisely, even if the results are not apparent to us! A lot can happen to mess up our best efforts. A single dead fly can change the smell of perfume to a stench (10:1). Sometimes folly is rewarded while wisdom is subjected to humiliation.

This can even come about seemingly by “accident.” One can fall in a hole he digs or be bitten by a snake (10:8-11). In spite of the accidental foils of life that can strike anyone, the Preacher still emphasized the need to live wisely. There is a blessing that will come at some time in some way:

Cast your bread upon the waters,
for you will find it after many days (11:1).

As the Preacher begins to draw his lessons to a close, he unveils a bit of life beyond the sun. He explains that humans do not know and understand the ways of God. We have limited vision.

As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything (11:5).

So the role of man is to live right in wisdom under the commands of God, and let God be God directing the paths beyond the sun. In the morning we sow our seed, and in the evening. For we do not know what will happen, but God does! (11:6). We live our years enjoying them, but knowing that they will also have “days of darkness.” Such is the vanity of life! (11:8).

In this life we live remembering we are not alone. There is a God who is in control and operates with a vision beyond ours. So while all is vanity, there is a God who rises above the vanity. In this the Preacher draws his lessons to a close with a final assessment:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil (12:13-14).

CONCLUSION

Ecclesiastes is, in ways, a difficult book to understand and explain. It seems to vacillate between Godly advice for living, and pessimistic, almost fatalistic, assessments of the reasons for living. Ardel Caneday, in his article entitled *Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?* explained,

The difficulty of interpreting this book is proportionately related to one's own readiness to adopt Qoheleth's ["the Preacher's"] presupposition—that everything about this world is marred by the tyranny of the curse which the Lord God placed upon all creation. If one fails to recognize that this is a foundational presupposition from which Ecclesiastes operates, then one will fail to comprehend the message of the book.¹⁰

Think back to my conversation on Thursday night. Why does my friend the atheist doctor do the good things he does? Does he see those acts for the vanity they are? Does he see that under the sun, one has much to eat, while others have little? Both will die one day. Is it better to offer one a few more days to live, if those days are lived in misery? What about sustaining one life at the cost of ten more deaths, as Malthus opined?

Of course, we as believers understand that there is one “above the sun” who gives meaning to such deeds. He calls us to compassionate service for those who need his love. The vanity of life is not there for those who live in trust of him who gives life meaning! This brings us to the points for home.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity*” (Eccl. 1:2).

There is something profound here that we miss reading simply the English or even the Hebrew Old Testament. The Jewish scholars translating this passage into Greek used the Greek word *mataiotes* for the Hebrew *hevel*. The Greek conveys the idea of futility, but is especially important in the Christian understanding because of its use by Paul. Paul reflects back into the teaching of Ecclesiastes in Romans 8, using the Greek equivalent of *hevel*. Paul wrote,

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation

¹⁰ Caneday, Ardel, “Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?”, *Grace Theological Journal* 7.1 (1986), at 21.

was subjected to futility [*mataiotes / hevel*], not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved (Rom. 8:18-24).

There is a life under the sun that is futile, that makes no sense, that seems both out of control and corrupt. Yet there is a life under the Son that carries glory and redemption. This is our hope, nothing less. This gives the final answer to the cry of Ecclesiastes. For the futility of this life does not end with death. This life opens the door to eternal glory with the Father.

2. *“Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man”* (Eccl. 12:13).

Wisdom is nice; wisdom is helpful. It gives insight and helps one navigate this life in God’s direction and care. But we are not required to figure out God’s big picture. He does not show us life beyond the sun so we can walk by sight. He charges us to fear him, to keep his commandments, and to trust him with the big picture. This means we walk by faith, not by sight. Pick out an area of your life that has you anxious or frustrated with what has happened or what is coming. Set this before God and choose to fear him and keep his commandments. Then watch him work your crises out for your good and the good of his kingdom.

3. *“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might”* (Eccl. 9:10).

This was a memory verse for me in Middle School. Commit it to memory! It does not guarantee you a trouble free-life. It does not guarantee you success in all you do. But it is good wise counsel that will help you walk in the center of God’s will. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might! Do it to God’s glory!

WANT MORE?

Next week we consider the Song of Solomon. This is a book unlike any other in the Bible. Read ahead and email us your thoughts and questions at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com.