

Ecclesiastes: Everything is Vapour

Part 1 - How to Live in a Fallen World

Text: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on January 12, 2020 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** This morning I want to begin a new sermon series through the book of Ecclesiastes. Even if you have never read Ecclesiastes, you have probably heard little quotes from it that people use in everyday speech, at weddings, and in famous songs. Here's a few of the most common quotes:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 2) Ecc 1:9: "There is nothing new under the sun."**
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** The phrase "eat, drink, and be merry" paraphrases **Ecc 2:24 "Eat and drink and find enjoyment"**
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 4) Ecc 1:2: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!"**
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 5) Ecc 12:1: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth."**
 - Ecclesiastes 4:12 is often quoted at weddings: **(SHOW SLIDE 6) "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."**
 - In December of 1965 the #1 song on the Billboard Hot 100 was "Turn, Turn, Turn" by the Byrds. It is based entirely on Ecclesiastes chapter 3, which begins by saying, **(SHOW SLIDE 7) "There is a time for everything." (Ecc 3:1)** and goes on to talk about a time to be born, a time to die, a time for hate, and a time for peace.
- You may have heard these isolated quotes but most people have little idea what the book is about as a whole. Those who have read it often think it is a very negative and skeptical book about how meaningless life is without God.
 - I want to show that this is a misunderstanding. In fact, joy and meaning in life are some of the main themes throughout Ecclesiastes. Oh yes, this book makes us face the hard realities of life but its overall purpose is to equip us to cope with them and even to thrive amidst them.
 - So, let's begin this new series that will take us to Easter. Today I want to introduce the book by asking three questions: *who wrote Ecclesiastes, what is Ecclesiastes about, and why should we read Ecclesiastes?*

WHO WROTE ECCLESIASTES?

- **(SHOW SLIDE 8) First, who wrote Ecclesiastes?**
 - Look with me at verse 1. **READ 1 - The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.**
- The author refers to himself as "the Preacher." The Hebrew word is **(SHOW SLIDE 9) "Qohelet" (pronounced ko-hell-it) = "one who assembles" or "one who calls people together."** Before the time of Christ, the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek and the Greek word for Qohelet (someone who gathers others into an assembly) is *ekklesiastes*. So, the book's title refers to a person who gathers others into an assembly.
 - Since Qohelet's purpose is to gather the people of God in order to teach them, the translators have referred to him as "the Preacher." Other translations have "the Teacher."
- So, who is this Preacher who has assembled the people of God together to hear his speech? Look again at verse 1. **READ 1 - The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.**
 - Who was King David's son, who became the King of Israel, and reigned in Jerusalem? Solomon. Some scholars say this is a later man speaking through the character of Solomon but I agree with the scholars who say it is best to just stay with Solomon as the author.

- The fact that Solomon is the Preacher should make you want to listen to his speech. Why? We read in 1 Kings 4:29: **(SHOW SLIDE 10) “God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore.”**
 - Solomon used this great wisdom to craft this speech. He says of his speech in 12:10 that he **(SHOW SLIDE 11) “sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.”** He also claims that the words he writes were given to him by God when he says in 12:11, **(SHOW SLIDE 12) “The words of the wise . . . are given by one Shepherd.”**
 - So already we are seeing that it is incorrect to view this book as the words of a cynic, a skeptic, or of a mentally unstable man at the end of his tether. Listen, this book is being recommended to us as royal wisdom, as being carefully put together, as well thought out, and inspired by God himself.
 - What a gift to us. Life is very difficult and frustrating but Solomon will give us wisdom on how to face all that this new year will bring us.

WHAT IS ECCLESIASTES ABOUT?

- **(SHOW SLIDE 13) Second, what is Ecclesiastes about?**
 - We will spend most of our time on this. Solomon gets right to the point in verse 2. **READ 2 - *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.***
- In English the word vanity refers to something that is worthless or pointless like when we say, **“it’s all in vain.”** And so other translations of verse 2 say, **“meaningless, meaningless . . . everything is meaningless.”**¹
 - On this view, Ecclesiastes is very negative and pessimistic. So rather than seeing this as the wisdom of Solomon, some take it to be the ramblings of a cynical man who is now old and disillusioned with life.
 - Others see Solomon as a wise man who is trying to convince us that life is meaningless and futile without God. So, the message becomes one of **“you can’t find true meaning in life without God so come to Jesus and you will find meaning.”**
 - This is probably the most common view, but I want to show you that it too is mistaken.
- It all comes down to the Hebrew word that gets translated as “vanity” or “meaningless.” The Hebrew word is “hebel” (pronounced he-vel). Literally it means “vapour, breath, smoke, or mist.” So, a literal translation would read, **“A mere breath, a mere breath . . . everything is a breath.”** Or, **“vapour, vapour . . . everything is vapour.”**
 - I wish the translators would just keep it literal instead of trying to interpret it with words like “meaningless.” As a reader you’re supposed to think about a puff of breath and ask, **“what does Solomon mean when he says that everything is like a breath?”**
 - As I just mentioned, the most common view is that he means everything is meaningless because you can’t grab onto a breath.
- However, I want to join my voice with the many scholars and commentators who say that this translation is incorrect. I’m not saying the Bible is incorrect. I’m saying that some translations are incorrect in the way they translate “hebel” into English.
 - Even the translators themselves want you to be aware of this. For instance, we are using the English Standard Version. You will see that the translators have written a footnote next to the first use of the word “vanity.”
 - It says, **“The Hebrew term hebel, translated vanity or vain, refers concretely to a “mist,” “vapor,” or “mere breath,” and metaphorically to something that is fleeting or elusive.”**

¹ New International Version.

- I want to argue along with the translator’s footnote that “hebel” means that life is fleeting and elusive.
 - This changes the whole way you read the book Ecclesiastes so that Solomon’s big point is *not* about how meaningless life is but about how short it is; not about how pointless it is but about how frustrating it can be.
 - So what is Ecclesiastes about? Let me show you three things.

LIFE IS FLEETING

- **(SHOW SLIDE 14) First, Ecclesiastes is about the fact that life is fleeting (not that life is meaningless).**
 - The very word “hebel” shows you this even as you say it. It has two syllables and both force out a puff of breath out of your mouth: “He” is a puff of breath and “vel” is another puff of breath.
 - Just because something is fleeting doesn’t mean it is meaningless. Your breakfast was fleeting but it was not meaningless. Your last breath was fleeting but that does not mean it is meaningless.
 - If you are using an actual Bible and not the insert look at the verse right before this in the Bible, which is Proverbs 31:30. This verse praises the godly woman saying, **(SHOW SLIDE 15) “Charm is deceitful and beauty is hebel but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.”**
 - That’s not saying a woman’s beauty is meaningless. It’s saying that youthful beauty is fleeting and temporary so that a woman’s godliness is more important than her physical beauty.
- In the same way, Solomon begins his speech with this fact: A mere breath, a mere breath, everything is a breath. Everything is temporary. Everything is fleeting: beauty, success, money, pleasure, growing in knowledge, career success, and of course our very lives. We will all die. All is hebel.
 - If you are going to live this next year well then the Preacher is saying you must embrace this view of reality: that all is hebel.
 - That doesn’t mean your life is meaningless. Solomon will call us to find meaning in our short lives by living for God. Throughout this book there is also a strong note of joy and rejoicing in gifts like food and drink.
- This is how exactly how the Israelites understood the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes was read during the Festival of Booths, which God commanded Israel to observe. The festival had two purposes. The first was to celebrate the blessings of God through the year. It is a feast! It is a time of great joy. They read Ecclesiastes because Solomon continually encourages us to enjoy the food and drink that God has given us.
 - Second, the Festival of Booths refers to the time when Israel was travelling through the desert on the way to the Promised Land. They did not build houses in the desert. They lived in tents or booths. During this feast the Israelites lived in tents in order to remember this time. Living in a tent is the definition of a temporary state, not a meaningless state.
 - So, Israel read Ecclesiastes during the Feast of Booths to celebrate God’s blessing even as they lived in temporary homes. This is what Ecclesiastes is about.
- Perhaps the best New Testament verse to explain Ecclesiastes is James 4:14: **(SHOW SLIDE 16) “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”** This is exactly what Solomon asks in Ecc 6:12: **(SHOW SLIDE 17) “For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his [hebel] life, which he passes like a shadow?”** Solomon is reflecting on the reality of Genesis 3 that we must all die.
 - So, let me put it like this: **(SHOW SLIDE 18) Solomon is not troubled by the meaninglessness of life but by how quickly everything, including life itself, comes to an end.**

- So, Solomon begins his speech by giving us a reality check. Everything, including your very life, is fleeting. You must start with the fact that you are going to die and then reverse engineer your life from there.
 - Isn't this what changed Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' famous story *A Christmas Carol*? Scrooge was greedy, cruel, and self-centred. The ghosts took him a journey to show him how poorly he had lived in the past and present. But it was the ghost of Christmas future that changed everything. The scene reaches its highest point when Scrooge finds himself before a gravestone. The ghost points to it.
 - Dickens writes, "**Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, EBENEZER SCROOGE.**" He awakens to find it is all a dream. He realizes he still has a bit more time to live and so starts living differently.
- Breath, breath . . . Everything is breath! To live well this next year we must come to grips with the fact that everything, including our very lives, are fleeting.

LIFE IS ELUSIVE (FRUSTRATINGLY SO!)

- **(SHOW SLIDE 19) Second, Ecclesiastes is about the fact that life is frustratingly elusive (not that life is meaningless).**
 - A breath is fleeting but it is also elusive. You cannot grab onto it. Smoke is the same. Next time you have a campfire try grabbing the smoke and shaping it into something. Not only is it impossible, when you try to grab it you actually just push it away and make it more difficult.
 - Life is hebel. Life is elusive and frustratingly so! We try to control our lives but we can't. It is like trying to control the wind.
- Again, Solomon is reflecting on Genesis 3; that not only are we going to die but we live in a sin-cursed world where nothing works the way it is supposed to.
 - We make plans and they fall apart. We invest our money as wisely as we can and the market crashes. We try to be wise but Solomon rightly points out that there is always a fly in the ointment.
- And then there's the things that crush all our attempts at control and crush us in the process. There is a story in Genesis that is all about "hebel." Do you know what it is? It is Genesis 4 and the story of Cain murdering his brother "Hebel." That's right the name Abel, comes from taking the Hebrew words and converting them to English. Abel's name is breath, vapour, mist.
 - Like a breath Abel was there one day and gone the next when his brother Cain murdered him. Can you imagine Adam and Eve's grief? Who found Abel's body? Can you imagine the pain as they asked questions like, "Why? What purpose is there in all this? What could we have done differently in raising our boys?"
 - When Eve gave birth to Cain she thought he was the man whom God promised to send to crush the head of the serpent. But now her eldest son has crushed the head of his younger brother and Abel's short life was over. The whole thing defied comprehension.
- You don't have to live long to feel the pain of this in your own life. A young couple wants kids but cannot get pregnant. Another gets pregnant only to miscarry and then to miscarry again. Mental health difficulties make it difficult to live let alone hold down a job. You work so hard at a relationship but it falls apart.
 - Hebel, hebel . . . everything is hebel! We try to control things but life is frustratingly elusive. We need this book because it teaches us how to live in a world where things aren't the way they're supposed to be.

- Solomon is going to teach us that there is a sense in which we must not try to control everything. We must be able to confess our ignorance and inability and yet also rejoice in what God has given us and live for him.

THE HARD QUESTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 20) Third, Ecclesiastes is about provoking you to reflect on what you will end up with for all the effort you put into your life.**
 - Look at verse 3. **READ 3 - *What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?*** People often take this phrase “under the sun” to refer to the limited human perspective that doesn’t see things from God’s perspective. This makes no sense for in Ecclesiastes godly people live under the sun, God works under the sun, and God gives gifts to be enjoyed under the sun. “Under the sun” simply means human life on the earth.
 - So having said that everything is fleeting and elusive, Solomon now provokes you to ask what you will gain from all your efforts in life. What will you end up with at the end? This question will guide the rest of the speech. You see, Solomon’s speech is not asking, **“is there any meaning in life?”** It is much more specific than that. His speech is asking, **“what will all your hard work and effort in this life get you in the end?”**
- He doesn’t answer it here but the implied answer is nothing because everything is hebel. And then just to drive all this home, he gives us verses 4-11 which are like having another bucket of cold water thrown on your face. Before he offers any answers, he gives us another reality check.
 - Here he takes us on a tour of creation to show us that despite all our hard work everything is fleeting and frustratingly elusive. **READ 4 - *A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.***
- Then he calls us to look at the sun, wind, and water cycle as examples of endless work and toil that never gains anything because it all must be done again.
 - In verse 5 the sun is described like a runner. At the beginning of the day the sun “hastens,” literally it gasps and pants, to other side of the sky. There is no sunshine left and so it must do its work again the next day.
 - The wind is like a “circuit” rider—it blows around one day and then must do its circuit again the next day.
 - Likewise, streams also “run” toward the sea. But the sea never gets filled up and the streams must do their work again.
 - The point is that for all their work there is nothing left over and they must do their work again.
- Solomon then says the same thing about humans. Verses 8-11 seem to be saying that despite all the words we speak and things we hear, we don’t come to the place where we have a surplus and don’t need to talk or see things anymore.
 - We must speak again. We want to see again. We need to listen again. Even things that seem new to us are just old things in new clothing. An iphone is amazing but it is just a different way of communicating like human beings always have.
 - Furthermore, the Preacher tells us in verse 11 that everything we do will be forgotten so that in this sense we also do not end up with any surplus. It’s like when we build sandcastles for hours up at Rath Trevor beach. It’s great fun but in the end the tide washes them all away. There is no sign of our work and no sign that we were there. So how should live this new year when the tides of time will wash away everything you accomplish and any sign that you ever existed?

- All this sounds depressing but how can we deny it? Reality check: life is hebel. It is fleeting. It is frustratingly elusive. We may work with all our might this next year to make our lives better but in the end we will die and be forgotten.

WHY SHOULD WE READ ECCLESIASTES?

- Why would Solomon begin on such a depressing note? Well let's take five more minutes and ask **(SHOW SLIDE 21) Third, why should we read Ecclesiastes?**
 - We should read it because despite the fact that we may not like it, Solomon is right. The only question is how we should live in light of the fact that everything is hebel. This is what the bible calls "wisdom." Wisdom means learning how to navigate life as it is, not how we wish it was. Solomon says that wisdom begins by accepting that all of life is hebel: that we cannot control our lives, that much of life is frustratingly elusive, and that we will die and be forgotten.
 - Wisdom does not sugarcoat life and say it is better than it is. Wisdom does not downplay how hard life can be and say it is an illusion. Wisdom begins by accepting that all of life is hebel.
- Wisdom then seeks to learn what it means to live in light of this fact. We will see that growing in wisdom means learning to trust God in the midst of it all. The wise person accepts their limitations and accepts that God does not explain everything to us. But the wise person also finds great joy and meaning in the gifts that God gives.
 - Solomon is so honest about how hard life is that some Christians have a hard time with his honesty.
 - At the same time Solomon calls us to enjoy the moment so much that some Christians get uncomfortable for we will see that he continually concludes that meaning and joy are found in simple things like enjoying a great meal, drinking wine, and making love to your spouse.
- What a gift the book of Ecclesiastes is to us. Here we have an entire book dedicated to a realistic assessment of how to live your short life in a way that is wise and honours your Creator.
 - Faith doesn't mean we can understand everything. Faith means trusting God and following him even when we don't understand while enjoying the gifts he gives us and obeying him.
 - Solomon doesn't give us all this answer in a nice formula. He takes us on a journey. We reach conclusions along the way and at the end.
- It is right here that we will also encounter the good news about Jesus Christ. For this is the world that Jesus came into. The Son of God became a man. He experienced how all of life is hebel. He experienced life under the sun.
 - He knows what it is like to lose a best friend for his best friend John was beheaded. He knows the frustration of his family not understanding him. He knows what it means to be so overwhelmed with stress that he physically collapses. He knows what it means to be misunderstood, slandered, and falsely accused. And like Abel before him, he knows what it means to have his life taken from him through a violent act of murder. Vapour, vapour, everything is vapour.
 - Yet, he also knows the joy of attending a wedding. He turns water into the finest of wines, enjoys many meals with his 12 friends, and uses his short time on earth for glory of his Father in heaven. This is the world that Jesus came to save. So, let us listen to the wisdom of Solomon on how to live when all of life is hebel. Let us listen to Solomon's son, the true and better son of David, the king over all the earth, who entered into our fallen world to save us all.