

Ecclesiastes: Everything is Vapour

Part 2 - It's Time for a Reality Check

Text: Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; 2:12-17, 24-26

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on January 19, 2020 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- (SHOW SLIDE 1) Blaise Pascal wrote these famous words: (SHOW SLIDE 2) ***“All people seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every person, even of those who hang themselves.”***¹
 - Pascal is right. Everything we do is aimed at making our lives happier. We exert tremendous effort in school, relationships, jobs, and even hobbies.
 - Yet, the question we are asking is this: ***“do we achieve anything of lasting value for all the effort we put in?”***
- This is the question that Solomon set out to answer in this book we call Ecclesiastes. In verse 3 he puts it like this: (SHOW SLIDE 3) ***“what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”*** What do we end up with for all the effort we put into life on this earth? Does anything remain?
 - Solomon went on a long quest to answer that question. And what is his answer? One word: hebel. Everything is “hebel.” Last week we saw that “hebel” literally means breath, or vapour, or mist.
 - Just as a breath is fleeting and elusive so Solomon’s answer is that despite all the work we put into our lives, nothing remains at the end of it all for we all die. Everything is hebel.
- In fact, Solomon asserts that the only way you will live wisely in this life and find happiness is by first coming to this conclusion. The reason we don’t live wisely and find the happiness we want is because we refuse to face the reality that everything is hebel.
 - Peter Kreeft puts it this way: (SHOW SLIDE 4) ***“your life is like a mansion with a terrifying hole right in the middle of the living-room floor. So you paper over the hole with a very busy wallpaper pattern to distract yourself.”*** He then puts it another way: (SHOW SLIDE 5) ***“You find a rhinoceros in the middle of your house. The rhinoceros is wretchedness and death. How in the world can you hide a rhinoceros? Easy: cover it with a million mice. Multiple diversions.”***²
- He’s saying that we cannot handle the fact that everything is hebel and so we fill our lives with distractions to avoid facing reality.
 - This is truer today than at any point in history for the slightest moment of silence or solitude is immediately filled by picking up our phones. We not only cover the rhino, we can now fill the whole house with the mice of distraction so that we forget the rhino is even there.
- Solomon is saying that if you want to live wisely and want to find happiness then you need a reality check. You must face the fact that there is a rhino in your living room. Only when you really accept the fact that everything, including your very life, is fleeting can you then learn the secret to living wisely and finding true happiness.
 - So today Solomon is going to give us three reality checks. Once he has done this we will then be ready for the shift in perspective that we need to have. Three reality checks, one shift in perspective.

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (Ozymandias Press, 2016), Kindle Edition, Location 1898.

² Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascals' Pensees* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 172.

REALITY CHECK #1

- **(SHOW SLIDE 6) Reality check #1: nothing works the way it is supposed to (and you cannot fix it).**
 - Look at verses 12-13. **READ 12-13a** - ¹²*I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.* ¹³*And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.*
- Solomon first reminds us of his credentials and then reminds us of what his quest was specifically about. His credentials are impressive. He is the king. As a king he had an almost unlimited budget and power to go on his quest. Not only that God gave Solomon wisdom that surpassed anyone in the world and he says he devoted his wisdom to this quest for many years.
 - And what is the quest? Many misunderstand Ecclesiastes to say he is searching out the meaning of life. But that is not it. It is much more specific than that. In 1:3 he says he is looking at everything people *do*, the activities we put so much effort into. He wants to know if there is anything that will last in the end.
 - So the question is not what, “is there meaning in life” but rather “among all the things we work for, is there anything we do that will last?”
- Solomon gets right to his conclusion and it is a bucket of cold water in your face. Look at the second half of verse 13. **READ 13b** - *It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.* ¹⁴*I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is [hebel] and a striving after wind.*
 - So what is his answer? Nothing lasts. Despite all our efforts, everything is fleeting. Nothing remains. Some read this and think that Solomon is a bitter cynic and if he just knew God he wouldn't speak so foolishly. This could not more incorrect. What you have here is a man who knows God, knows his Bible, and speaks with mature wisdom.
 - This isn't secular thinking. It is God-centred thinking. Notice that God is at the centre of his whole answer. He says life doesn't work the way we want it to because it is God who made it this way.
- Then he gives us a proverb to explain all he means. **READ 15** - *What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.* The key to understanding this is to read ahead in the book where he writes in 7:13: **(SHOW SLIDE 7) Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?**
 - Solomon is reflecting on Genesis chapter 3. He refers to us in verse 13 as the “children of Adam.” God made Adam and Eve. He placed them in a garden. At the centre was the tree of life and a tree they were forbidden to eat from. When God was the centre of their lives everything had meaning and joy, including their work. When God was at the centre there was no death or hardship. But the serpent suggested that God was holding out on them, that if they ate from the forbidden tree their eyes would be open and they would find a greater happiness that God wasn't giving them. And so we read that the woman saw **“the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”**
 - But it was all a lie. They did not become wise. They became fools. In that moment, everything fell apart. As a consequence for their rebellion God also cursed the ground so it would only produce food with difficult toil and he sentenced them to death. In Solomon's words, God took his world that was straight and he bent it. In Paul's language in Romans 8, God subjected creation to bondage so that it groans.
 - So if the universe is a car, then God bent the axel so that life does not drive the way you want it to. Everything in life is now bent and doesn't work the way it is supposed to.

- This explains why you often groan and say, “Why doesn’t life work how I want it to.” The Christian answer is far more satisfying than the secular answer. If there is no God then life is just hard and that is just the way it is. It is neither good nor bad that it is hard. It just is.
 - But you know there is something more here. You feel that it is wrong. Christianity says that when you feel this, you are in sync with reality. It is as bad as you feel it to be. Why? Because God bent the world so that nothing works the way it originally was designed to.
- As a consequence of human rebellion, God has ordained that life be like vapour. You can’t control it. You can’t master it. It slips through your hands. It is like chasing the wind, or nowadays we might say, “it is like herding cats.” The reason why you cannot master your life is because God has bent the world.
 - This unhappy truth is meant to teach you by hard experience that you are a creature, not a god.
 - This unhappy truth is meant to teach you by hard experience what life is like when God is no longer at the centre.
 - This unhappy truth is meant to teach you by hard experience that wisdom is not found outside of God; rather, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.
- But even in this unhappy truth, there is hope.
 - If God bent the world then could it possible for God to make it straight again? We will think about that later but for now though we must clear away all the mice and face reality as it is. Reality check #1 is that the reason why life is so hard and you why you cannot master it is because God bent the world.

REALITY CHECK #2

- **(SHOW SLIDE 8) Reality check #2: all your efforts to become smarter will only lead to mental frustration.**
 - In response to what we have just talked about we may think, **“Well, if we just became more educated gave more intellectual effort to figuring out life then we could escape the difficulties and pains of effort.”**
 - Solomon says he tried this but in verse 17 he says **READ 17 - I perceived that this also is but a striving after the wind.** Why? Again he gives a proverb to explain what he means. Look at verse 18. **READ 18 – ¹⁸For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.**
- He’s not saying education is bad, or reading books is bad, or becoming smarter in your field is bad. In fact, he is going to tell us to pursue wisdom in a moment. But he is bursting the bubble that thinks if we just became smarter we could escape the hardships of life. It is actually quite the opposite.
 - Why? Because wisdom lets you see how complex and difficult life really is.
 - I talk with friends who are policeman. They know things that are threats to us that I do not know and it is a burden they have to carry. I talk with other friends in social work. They know of terrible things that happen to children that most do not and that knowledge increases sorrow. The more knowledge you have about global poverty, AIDS, environmental breakdown, or human trafficking the more mental frustration and sorrow you will have. Solomon would agree with the German proverb **“Much knowledge gives one a headache.”**
- So here is the wise king who values wisdom telling us that increasing in wisdom will not enable us to straighten this world that God has bent. In fact, it will only increase mental frustration and sorrow because we come to see just how bent the world actually is.
 - If that’s the case, then why bother trying to become wise? Why not just quit school, quite trying to learn, and give your mind over to mind numbing drugs or alcohol?

REALITY CHECK #3

- (SHOW SLIDE 9) Reality check #3: you should pursue wisdom but just know that you will end up like those who do not—dead! I told you he was uncovering the rhino.
 - **READ 12-13** - ¹² *So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.*
 - He said earlier that he used wisdom to seek out the answer to his quest but maybe his whole methodology was flawed. Since he couldn't find anything that ultimately lasts he ponders whether he should have pursued folly because anyone who come after him and goes on the same quest will only come to the same conclusion that all is hebel.
 - So maybe he shouldn't have bothered to be so wise.
- But he immediately concludes that although wisdom does bring frustration and sorrow it is better than folly. There is gain in wisdom. Why? **READ 13-14a** - *Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.* ¹⁴ *The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.*
 - We should strive to be wise in life for then we can see the things on the path of life that will trip us up and avoid some of them. The fool just walks in darkness and stumbles over everything.
- But lest you think that wisdom is something that lasts, that we gain for all our work at it under the sun, read verse 14. **READ 14b** - *And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.* What event happens to all of us? We die and are forgotten. No matter how great the hand of cards you have been dealt in life, no matter how hard you have worked to improved your hand, death is always the trump card. Keep reading. **READ 15** - ¹⁵ *Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is [hebel].* ¹⁶ *For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!*
 - And here the quest ends. All the mice are gone and we are face to face with the rhino. We put all this effort into life and for what? Everything is hebel. Everything is a puff of breath that quickly disappears and cannot be held onto.
 - Nothing works the way it is supposed to (and you cannot fix it).
 - All our efforts to become smarter only lead us to mental frustration.
 - And, even though pursuing wisdom is by far the better way the wise person still ends up in the same place as the fool—dead.
 - For all our effort, nothing remains in the end.
 - At this point in his quest Solomon has an emotional breakdown. Look at verse 17. **READ 17** - ¹⁷ *So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is [hebel] and a striving after wind.*
- Our lives are like the Titanic. In its day it was the height of human wisdom and effort. We had finally mastered ocean travel for it was reportedly said that even God could not sink this ship. We mastered it.
 - You probably remember that famous scene in the *Titanic* movie where Jack stands on the front of the boat and yells, "*I'm the king of the world.*" We all do this in our lives. We worked hard and think we've mastered things.
 - It's time for a reality check. A few days later this great human achievement along with "the king of the world" lay on the bottom of the ocean. Solomon is saying we must face reality: everything we achieve and do, including our very lives, is hebel.
- Once again, many people misinterpret this to say Solomon is showing how he pursued secular wisdom and found it was a dead end that leads to depression. No, this is godly wisdom and it reflects a man who is in touch with reality.
 - This is a right response because the curse of the Fall is meant to lead to this. If you've never felt frustrated by your inability to master life then it would mean that God failed in cursing the

ground. It is God's intention that we feel the effects of our human rebellion against him, that we have moments where work is hard, life is hard, where we bury our heads in our hands and groan.

- These moments are meant to lead us to the conclusion that everything is hebel. Everything is fleeting. Everything is frustratingly elusive.

SHIFT THE PERSPECTIVE

- But notice that the word "hate" is past tense. He hated, not that he presently hates.
 - In other words, he had a moment on his quest where he hated it but once he saw the reality that nothing lasts he then experience a shift in perspective.
- So in the final place, let's look at **(SHOW SLIDE 10) the shift in perspective.**
 - You can see that shift in perspective between verses 23 and 24. In 23 he is hating life. Now look at all the positives in verses 24-26. **READ 24-26** - ²⁴*There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God,* ²⁵*for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?* ²⁶*For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.*
- Before I define the shift, I want you to see that Solomon is giving a partial conclusion to his speech here. He begins to shift our perspective right now, not just at the end. Again, many people think Ecclesiastes is 11 chapters of depressing cynicism about how meaningless life is without God and then chapter 12 gives the shift in perspective that the key is to fear God and follow him.
 - But what I want to show you that Solomon actually gives four conclusions in this book—three of them are staggered evenly throughout the book and then there is one final conclusion in chapter 12.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** I've put this into a chart for you. I'll put it on the screen but it is also in your worship folder. Notice that Ecclesiastes is broken up into four sections and that each section ends with a conclusion.
 - Now even a quick scan of the conclusions will show you that he keeps talking about the same thing. God is at the centre of all the conclusions. Not only that God keeps giving us good gifts and these gifts are to be enjoyed. In fact, joy is one of the dominant themes in these conclusions.
 - Then he wraps it all up with a call to centre our lives around our Creator and follow his ways.
- So although God bent the world so it frustrates us, God has also given blessings to be enjoyed. Yes, our work can be hard and all we do will be forgotten but notice that we can find enjoyment in our work. Yes, we will die one day but that doesn't mean we can't find joy in a great meal with friends and family.
 - It is when you see the rhino clearly that you stop trying to use life for things it is not meant to give. When you see your own death clearly you can see that it is useless to endlessly amass wealth, or use money to gain power, or work hard to be remembered. Rather, you can work hard but find joy in the ordinary everyday gifts that God gives.
 - Solomon is not simply saying "carpe diem." Notice that the whole thing is God-centred. A wise person centres their life on God and receives the good things in life as gifts to be enjoyed.
- So I put the shift in perspective like this: **(SHOW SLIDE 12) accept that all is hebel in a fallen world, but enjoy the good things along the way as gifts from God.**
 - When God is at the centre then we are able to enjoy his gifts for what they are; temporary things for our enjoyment. They are not meant to be stepping stones to better things. We are not meant to master the world, or find fulfillment in our own fame, money, success, or power. Joy is not a means to an end. Joy is the gift. And so we find enjoyment in our work, in our hobbies, in our

relationships, in our meals, not as a means to some higher end but just as gifts from God to be enjoyed.

- The serpent claimed that we could be wise and find true happiness by breaking away from God, by placing ourselves at the centre rather than him. The serpent's invitation was to take and eat the fruit. Eve took and ate the fruit and Adam ate as well.
 - In this act they plunged themselves and the rest of us into chaos. They brought the curse into the house.
- But the good news of the Bible is that the very same God who bent the world is also the same God who is working to straighten it back to the way it is meant to be. He is doing this through Jesus Christ.
 - Jesus took bread and said take and eat for this is my body given for you. Jesus took the fruit of the vine and said take and drink for this is my blood shed for you. This pointed to his death on the cross. Like Adam and Eve before him he was tempted in a garden not to do what his Father commanded but where they rebelled he obeyed.
 - Through his death and resurrection Jesus started a new creation. A new creation where bent people are being made straight. A new creation where we are promised a world where everything works as it is supposed. A new creation where the curse of death is slain and cast out. A new creation that Jesus says is like the greatest dinner at a wedding where Jesus says he will drink the fruit of the vine with us again.
- Let the fallen state of this world show you that you are a creature. Bow the knee to your Creator. Ask him to forgive your sins. And then work in this life, not because you are trying to get more out of life than is possible, but as enjoyment of all the gifts that God has given you.