

The Pursuit

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2 May 22, 2024

You've seen it before. The scene in the movie where the unorthodox teacher stands in front of the class and tosses the textbook in the trash. *Dead Poet's Society*, *Maverick*, even Michael Scott does it in an episode of *The Office*. The students sit in wonder - *this* is a different kind of teacher.

You don't expect that scene to play out in the Bible. There you are, sitting in a "How-To-Live-Life" seminar. You just heard an amazing presentation from a teacher named *Proverbs*. You're excited to put his lessons into practice. Then the *next* speaker approaches the podium. He looks a lot like *Proverbs*, but he's older. He carries himself differently. You can tell he's seen some things.

Before this new speaker begins, the host of the "How-To-Live-Life" seminar introduces him. "Ladies and gentleman, we have a special opportunity here to listen to earth's greatest expert. Believe me, you're *really* going to want to hear what he has to say."

And then, the new speaker begins. "Nothing matters," he says. "You'll be dead soon. But the day you die is better than the day you were born." As you listen, you think to yourself, "Did he just say there's no difference between humans and animals? Did he say there's no afterlife? Did he say you really shouldn't be that righteous?"

At the end of his lecture, you might raise your hand and ask, "What about *Proverbs*?" Ecclesiastes answers, "I know *Proverbs*. I also know that outside these walls, the race doesn't always go to the swift. The good sometimes die young. And *nothing* you might achieve will last the test of time."

Ecclesiastes is different. It falls in the group of books we call the Wisdom Literature of the Bible - Job, *Proverbs*, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Song of Songs. But even though Ecclesiastes is in the club, it stands apart. It's been called the "strangest book" in the Bible¹ - "bipolar,"² - the "low point" of the Old Testament,³ and the Bible's "resident alien."⁴

Melville called it the "truest of all books,"⁵ but my college's campus pastor once taught us that the author obviously didn't know what he was talking about. What's going on here?

One commentator writes, "*There is perhaps no book in the Bible that is the subject of more controversies than Ecclesiastes.*"⁶ It's true. The folks in the ivory towers argue about *everything* in it. Is it prose, or is it poetry?⁷ Was it written in Hebrew or another language? *Who* wrote it? *When* was

¹ William P. Brown *Ecclesiastes*

² J. A. Loader *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet*

³ Franz Delitzsch, quoted in Duane A. Garrett *The New American Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

⁴ NAC

⁵ Tim Chaddick *Better: How Jesus Satisfies The Search For Meaning*

⁶ Choon-Leong Seow *Ecclesiastes*

⁷ Greg Parsons *Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Ecclesiastes, Part 2*

it written? *Where* was it written? It has intricate structure. No, it has *no* structure. It's philosophy. No, it's anthropology. It's pessimistic. No it's optimistic.

Even if we tune out all of those academic squabbles, we have to admit that when we read this book, it's unsettling. The book *knows* it's unsettling. At the end we're told, "[This book is] like [a] cattle prod—painful but helpful...like a nail-studded stick with which a shepherd drives the sheep." It is meant to poke us. It is meant to confront us with difficult thoughts and realities.

But we also step back and remember that the Holy Spirit inspired, preserved, and delivered this message for us. This book is *essential*. We *need* to be prodded by it. We need to wrestle with it, even though it ends up asking some questions that it does not answer. We need to pursue what Ecclesiastes wants to teach us. This book is all about *pursuing*. Let's start getting to know it.

The name of the book itself is unusual. What does "Ecclesiastes" mean, anyway? The word comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. In Hebrew, the title of the book is the title of the *person*. He is called Qohelet,⁸ and already we are confronted with ambiguity. The precise meaning of this word is uncertain.⁹ Your version probably has either "the Teacher," or "the Preacher." But other possible meanings are the the one who assembles,¹⁰ the summoner.¹¹ The *collector*.¹² The *searcher*.¹³ The idea is that this individual is on a quest and he has cataloged his expedition so that he can gather us together and teach us about the things he discovered. So, *who* was this Qohelet?

Ecclesiastes 1:1 - The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.

From before Christ was born until the 18th century, both Jews and Christians accepted Solomon as the Teacher and author of Ecclesiastes. I say Teacher *and* author because the book does something interesting: At the very beginning and very end of the book, an *author* speaks to us and he talks to us about *the Teacher*, as if he's someone else. It's like that illustration I gave - the author is the host of the presentation and he invites the Teacher to come up and deliver his lecture. Afterward, the author returns to make some closing remarks about what we've all heard.

You probably noticed I said "until the 18th century," Solomon was considered the author. What happened then? Well, "Biblical criticism" happened. During the enlightenment period, particularly in Germany, theologians started adapting secular ideas in their study of the Bible.¹⁴

The goal became: "How can we understand the Bible *without* the supernatural?" Darwinism influenced their interpretation.¹⁵ This mentality has pervaded academia ever since. You'll hear it called "form criticism," or, "source criticism," or "redaction criticism" or "higher" criticism. It's all the

⁸ Roland Murphy *Word Biblical Commentary: Ecclesiastes*

⁹ NAC

¹⁰ WBC

¹¹ Dan Lioy *A Biblical-Theological Examination of Genesis 5, Ecclesiastes 1, and 1 Corinthians 15:50-58*

¹² Seow

¹³ Ray Stedman *Ecclesiastes 1:1-18 - The Search For Meaning*

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_criticism

¹⁵ Iain Provan *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

same idea: Let's reject the supernatural and instead see the Bible as a collection of *less* enlightened *human* documents. What you'll often find is that these scholars think the entire Old Testament was written *after* the Babylonian captivity.¹⁶ They conclude we can't accept that the Bible is telling us the truth about when it was written, who wrote it, or what it records. They say the Bible needs to be "demythologized." Really, it's just an attack on the Bible's authority. Sadly, many well-meaning Christian scholars still go along with this mentality and method of interpretation.

With that said, Ecclesiastes never *explicitly* says that Solomon is the author and Teacher. What we're told is that the author is a son of David and he was king in Jerusalem. That could be a number of people. *But*, given what he says about his wealth, his activities, and his level of wisdom, the book definitely wants us to think it is Solomon speaking.¹⁷

I listened to a podcast with some of these Christian scholars who throw in with higher criticism. They said, "Who cares if Solomon really wrote the book? It shouldn't matter at all." But that's a problem because in this book the author says, "I conducted a bunch of real experiments to find truth about life and purpose and the human experience." If that's not true, if the the lab experiment was made up or the data falsified, how can we trust his conclusions?

I learned this week about a man named Diederik Stapel. He's been called "the biggest con man in academic science."¹⁸ As a university professor, he falsified more than 50 papers with fake research. He gave fake data to students under him who were "earning" their PhDs. He made all these claims and was published in all sorts of journals - but it was all made up. His findings weren't true.

Experts can't make up their studies. It's the basis of true discovery. And here, the book of Ecclesiastes says, "I have run comprehensive and profound experiments concerning the human condition, so listen to what I have to say so you don't waste your life." If *that's* the message, then it definitely matters whether this book can be trusted.

Now, even if you're not familiar with this book, I'm guessing you're familiar with its slogan, which is: "Everything is _____"

Ecclesiastes 1:2 - ²"Absolute futility," says the Teacher. "Absolute futility. Everything is futile."

Ecclesiastes is a book full of keywords. The most important is rendered "futility" in the CSB. Your version may say "vanity," or "meaningless." The Hebrew word is *hevel*, and it will be used 38 times in 12 chapters. This is the Teacher's main word. In fact, in Hebrew it's the very first word he says.¹⁹ Hevel, hevel, everything is hevel. That's the word he starts with and the word he'll end with.

It is important that we understand what he means. *This* is the point from which he instructs us. But

¹⁶ <https://www.gotquestions.org/redaction-higher-criticism.html>

¹⁷ Seow

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diederik_Stapel

¹⁹ Seow

what does hevel mean? There's a difference between *vanity* and *futility* and *meaningless*, right? Things become even more complicated when we start listing out what the Teacher labels as hevel.

Wealth is hevel. Work is hevel. Being single. Being born. Being wise. Injustice. Succession. Enjoying good things. *Everything everyone does* is hevel.

But wait...how can *everything* be categorized the same way? And, if *everything* is "meaningless," why then does the Teacher command us to enjoy good things and work hard (which he will)?

We need to understand hevel with more than one definition. The word literally refers to smoke or vapor.²⁰ David used this term in Psalm 144 when he said, "A human is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow."²¹ Jeremiah used the term to talk about "worthless idols." And then he said, "The people who follow hevel idols become hevel themselves."²² But then, in Proverbs 31 we're told, "charm is deceptive and beauty is *fleeting* - hevel." That doesn't mean beauty doesn't exist or that it is meaningless - just that, like smoke, it dissipates.

So when we come to this word in Ecclesiastes we shouldn't have a one-sense-fits-all attitude. In some cases it will have a negative connotation, like meaningless, but in other cases it will mean something more like "absurd," or "transient," or "ephemeral." As we listen, the image of smoke is very helpful. Because smoke is *real*, but you can't hold onto it. You can't control it. You can't use it to construct anything. There it is and then it's gone. *That's* hevel. And the Teacher says life is like that.

There are other keywords and phrases the Teacher likes to use. We're told in chapter 12, "The Teacher sought to find just the right words to express truths clearly."²³ He picks his words very carefully. Some of the words he keeps using are: Toil. Wisdom. Death. Advantage. But, along with hevel, there are two other key phrases that are going to be the most important for us in our study.

The first is: *under the sun*. He uses this phrase 29 times. It means life on earth - life in the mortal realm. Life as the average person knows it - disconnected from eternal purposes. And the message is that if your life is lived for what you can gain, build, or experience *under the sun*, then no matter what you do, your life will be nothing more than a puff of smoke.

We can trust that the Teacher is right about that conclusion because *he lived it*. We'll see all the things he did. He went farther into all of these pursuits than any of us could ever dream and the end of every single one was: *hevel*. One author points out he went down seven different roads: He was a philosopher, a student, a party animal, an alcoholic, a workaholic, an aristocrat, a puritan, a philanthropist. *Every single road was a dead end*.²⁴ The Teacher was always left unsatisfied.

²⁰ Parsons

²¹ Psalm 144:4

²² Jeremiah 2:5

²³ Ecclesiastes 12:10 NLT

²⁴ David A. Dorsey *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*

As he pursued all these things, none of them solved the problems in his heart and the absurdity of life. *But*, as he studied, he noticed that God was always there, in the background, and He is very active. He *does* things. He *gives* things. Most importantly in this book, He wants to give joy. This is other most important word the Teacher keeps returning to.

Seven times, usually at a very low point of his study, the Teacher will pause and tell us to enjoy our lives - to rejoice in the day-to-day. In the face of disappointment, in our confusion, when confronted with injustice, when dealing with old age and death, receive *joy*. The Teacher says that our lives are a *gift* from God that He wants us to enjoy them even *when hevel happens*. In fact, one commentary boils down the entire message of Ecclesiastes to this heading: *Finding Joy In A Fallen World*.²⁵

The Jews would read Ecclesiastes aloud during their Feast Of Tabernacles - which was a celebration of eating, drinking, and joy.²⁶ How can this be? How can a message that *seems* so pessimistic - even despair - lead us to joy?

Have you ever started a book then read the last page to see how it ends? This is a book where we need to read the last page before reading the rest. The closing words are *not* from the Teacher, but from the *author*, who endorses the message of the Teacher and then says,

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 - ¹³When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is this: fear God and keep his commands, because this is for all humanity. ¹⁴For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.

The secret is: there is *more* than what we see *under the sun*. There is a God Who is watching and working. A God Who has gifts for us, a plan for us, a purpose for our lives *even when those lives seem to be ruined by the hardships of this world!* A God we can *pursue*.

The Teacher knew a lot. He experienced more in life than any of us ever could. *But* there are things we know that he didn't. We have a wisdom that was hidden to the believers of the Old Testament. Paul explains to us in 1 Corinthians that *Christ* is the wisdom of God. One author writes, "Ecclesiastes is the question to which *Christ* is the answer."²⁷

This doesn't cancel out the Teacher's message. In fact, we can learn all the more from it. As we hear the Teacher tell us again and again, "There's nothing new under the sun," we are reminded that he's right, *but there is* something new *above* the sun - *We* are new creations in Christ. As we hear, "hard work under the sun is vanity," we can remember the promise that when we serve God, our labor is *not* in vain!²⁸ When we hear that time, death, and chance are coming for us all, we remember that God elevates us out of worry, out of despair, out of the intimidation of death, the frustration of the random nature of life. We are able to see life providentially and in the light of the New Covenant.

²⁵ Douglas Mangum *Lexham Context Commentary: Old Testament*

²⁶ Parsons

²⁷ Peter Kraft quoted in Chaddick

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:58

The Teacher wants to drive his listeners to God.²⁹ Duane Garrett writes, “*In short, Ecclesiastes urges its readers to recognize that they are mortal. They must abandon all illusions of self-importance, face death and life squarely, and accept with fear and trembling their dependance on God.*”³⁰

Our lives are a vapor, here for a moment, then gone. We know we will live on in eternity. But *this* life is hevel. As we live it, a lot of absurd, transient, confusing things will happen. The Teacher says, “Yeah, that’s right. There is no magic formula that guarantees wealth or long life or success. Don’t pretend like it always works out the way you want. Because, most of the time, it doesn’t. *But*, if you pursue wisdom, if you have a God-centered view of life,³¹ not only will your odds for advantage increase, you also will be in line with this God Who made you, watches you, loves you. *And*, the more you will truly be able to enjoy your day-to-day life, which is what God wants for you.”

Did you see Jerry Seinfeld’s commencement speech at Duke University this year? It was fun and humorous. But in it, Jerry says things like, “Life doesn’t make sense. The world doesn’t make sense. It’s an insane mess.” He should read Ecclesiastes. He needs that goad. He needs this pointy stick.

For unbelievers, Ecclesiastes will poke you with the reminder that you are going to die. And one day, no one will remember anything you did. What happens when you take your last breath? You may try to tell yourself, “Well, nothing happens, we just cease to exist.” But it’s not true. And deep down you *know* it’s not true because God has put eternity in your heart.

Ecclesiastes pokes believers with some hard truths, too. Trying to do the right thing doesn’t always result in better circumstances. Sometimes what should happen *doesn’t* happen, because we live in a fallen world. Meanwhile, you *can* be content. We are commanded to “refuse to worry,” in this book - to spend less time stressing and more time enjoying - to make every part of our lives God-centered. To pursue the portion God has given you and to realize *His* joy is probably not the “happiness” we think of when we hear phrases like, “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The Teacher will admit that this pursuit is difficult. In fact, he’ll tell us he fell short of apprehending wisdom the way he wanted. But here’s what’s exciting: There’s another teacher who did. Paul figured it out. “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself.”³²

A solid, meaningful, joy-filled day-to-day life is within our reach. In fact, that is a *gift* God wants us to receive. Ecclesiastes will help us in our pursuit. It will help us avoid dead ends. It will get us above the sun, closer to the Lord, pressing on and enjoying the path along the way.

²⁹ NAC

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

³² Philippians 4:11