



Ecclesiastes: Vanity or Victory?

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:1-3)

Theologians have debated the message of Ecclesiastes. Heretics have appealed to it for support of their errant views. Sincere believers have read it and wondered about its purpose and message.

Preacher, we take the word for granted, but it seems a strange choice for an Old Testament book written a thousand years before Christ. The title of the book in our English Bibles, Ecclesiastes, comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament and refers to someone who calls together a group of people to hear a formal proclamation. The Hebrew word (English form) is "Qoheleth." It corroborates the meaning of the Greek word.

In Ecclesiastes 12:11 Solomon describes his words—I believe his specific words in this book—as "given by one shepherd." A number of commentaries, I believe correctly, interpret this phrase as a claim to inspiration for the book of Ecclesiastes. Thus our interpretation of the book should reflect the Holy Spirit's direction, not merely the autobiographical reflections of a man whose life was at best a confusing mixture of incredible wisdom and incredible indulgence.

How do we start with such a pessimistic view of life and yet end the book on such an insightful and proper view of God and of life? It is likely that we have failed to follow Solomon's reasoning, as well as his perspective, especially in the early stages of this book.

Meaningless translates a word which includes ideas of brevity, unreliability, frailty and futility, lack of discernible purpose. **3** Real progress cannot be found. *Gain* is a term used in ancient commerce. It refers to substantial achievement, observable evidence that something worthwhile has been

done. *Labour* and *toil* may refer to physical effort (see 2:4–8; Ps. 127:1) or to mental and emotional heaviness (see 2:23; Ps. 25:18). Mr Teacher refers to what he observes *under the sun*. In view of its frequency and the sharp distinction made in 5:2 the phrase must be significant. It is attested in various ancient cultures and refers to the earthly realm as opposed to 'heaven', where God supremely reveals himself. The phrases 'on earth', 'under heaven' and 'under the sun' are synonymous. See further in the Introduction. Mr Teacher explicitly confines his outlook for the moment to the limited resources of the world he surveys.¹

I believe that Carson captures the point of Solomon's early perspective. Solomon may well be confessing his own failure, but he also takes us on a frighteningly honest exploration of life "under the sun," in the world made by God, but attempted without God's "above the sun" perspective. Solomon repeatedly throughout the book reminds us of God's presence and governance so that life as we should live it in godly wisdom is not vanity. Only life confronted without consideration of God's fixed and wise directions is "vanity and vexation of spirit."

Our generation of Christians has more information available than perhaps any in the past. Yet it seems that most believers in our time and culture want a "quick-fix" "TV

¹D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition*, Rev. ed. of: *The new Bible commentary*. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed., Ec 1:2 (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

dinner” answer to life’s complex questions and issues. They prefer to check their serious, thinking abilities in the parking lot of the church with their cars and enter the church for a brief and often superficial “peppery” sermonette that makes them feel good, but avoids confronting the difficult and uncomfortable questions of life “under the sun.” Given this superficial penchant, it is no wonder that Ecclesiastes will seldom appear on anyone’s list of favorite Bible books.

We have allowed the godless existentialist philosophies to dominate our culture while we have often passively ignored the deeper issues addressed *and answered* in Scripture. Consider these nearly parallel comments, but focus on the incredible distinctions that put them in opposite camps of worldviews.

1. The existentialist “motto” of sorts is “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die.” The intent of this saying urges subscribers to indulge all of their appetites for their sensual and self-satisfying urges because there is nothing after death. It is all useless. If you wish to see the cultural consequences of such a philosophy, take a hard look at modern Europe.
2. Solomon modifies this blind alley attitude. “Eat, drink, and be merry; enjoy life as God’s gift.” Some six times Solomon scatters this exhortation throughout Ecclesiastes. While at first glance sounding similar to the existentialist’s view, this worldview is as nearly the mirror opposite as a view could be to the existentialist’s conclusion that life is meaningless and empty. Not only does this view change the way we look at life, it also changes our appetite for—and our definition of—what is good.

If we follow Solomon’s reasoning as he urges us to do in 12:9-12, we will discover the wisdom of this challenging book. We will take the roof off the multitude of deceptive and self-serving ideas that often parade under the flag of Biblical Christianity, but with deceptively false and cruel colors.

Supporters of a number of errant doctrines appeal to Ecclesiastes as supporting their ideas. Among them you will find the following:

1. Soul-sleep. This idea teaches that when a person dies, they lapse into unconscious existence (or non-existence?). Advocates of this view appeal to the Ecclesiastes passages that equate men and beasts. Both die. However, Solomon emphatically distinguishes the death of man and the death of the beasts. The “spirit” of the beast at death goes downward to the earth. The “spirit” of humans “goes upward” to “God who gave it.”
2. Fatalism. Advocates of this idea will appeal to a false interpretation of the first eight verses of the third chapter and teach that God has absolutely fixed and ordained the precise nature and time of every event in human existence, even including Hitler’s holocaust and our own 9/11 tragedy. At times advocates of this idea will assert that God’s fixed determinism even includes the precise location and timing of every drop of rain that falls. Inevitably advocates of this error will fall prey to the logical consequences of their error and teach that God either causes or “permits” sin. Often they will attempt to avoid making God the cause of sin by saying that He “permits” sin and then uses it for His glory. When I drive my car down a California freeway, I see occasional signs posted that inform me of the “permitted” speed at which I may drive my car on this road. Permission implies approval, something that God never does in Scripture toward sin. Difficulties and inconsistencies abound with this dreadful view. In terms of Solomon’s teaching they ignore the fact that in this book he warns against foolishness with a question “Why shouldst thou die before thy time?” (7:17), along with a significant number of other passages that deal with variables that alter the time of an individual’s

death. This view also ignores the primary meaning of the Hebrew word translated “time” in this verse, “a season.” We will examine this error more fully when we explore these verses.

Albert Barnes in his Old Testament commentary addresses the significance of the frequently used word “vanity” in Ecclesiastes.

Vanity—This word הֶבֶל *hebel*, or, when used as a proper name, in [Gen. 4:2](#), “Abel”, occurs no less than 37 times in Ecclesiastes, and has been called the key of the book. Primarily it means “breath,” “light wind;” and denotes what:

- (1) Passes away more or less quickly and completely;
- (2) Leaves either no result or no adequate result behind, and therefore
- (3) Fails to satisfy the mind of man, which naturally craves for something permanent and progressive: it is also applied to:
- (4) Idols, as contrasted with the Living, Eternal, and Almighty God, and, thus, in the Hebrew mind, it is connected with sin.

In this book it is applied to all works on earth, to pleasure, grandeur, wisdom, the life of man, childhood, youth, and length of days, the oblivion of the grave, wandering and unsatisfied desires, unenjoyed possessions, and anomalies in the moral government of the world.

Solomon speaks of the world-wide existence of “vanity,” not with bitterness or scorn, but as a fact, which forced itself on him as he advanced in knowledge of men and things, and which he regards with sorrow and perplexity. From such feelings he finds refuge by contrasting this with another fact, which he holds with equal firmness, namely, that the whole universe is made and is governed by a God of justice, goodness, and power.

We will visit Solomon’s excursions into “life under the sun,” but we must keep our minds clearly focused on his wise conclusion, that life under the sun is indeed a precious gift from God to be enjoyed,

something that we can do only as we live it with a distinctly “above the sun” perspective. It is interesting that, as Barnes notes, the name of the first son born to Adam and Eve after their fall into sin, Abel, is a derivative of the word translated in Ecclesiastes as “vanity.” I believe that Solomon will make a convincing case that any pursuit, even noble and righteous pursuits, engaged without God and a right perspective of God, will come to nothing. We may deceive ourselves. We may deceive our closest friends, but we can never deceive God.

What is wisdom, Biblical, God-given wisdom? The meaning of this word—this idea—is almost as evasive as the concept of the fear of God. Interestingly Scripture blends the two concepts together. The nearest to a working definition that I have found for Biblical wisdom means “skill in the art of living.” The truly “wise” person develops skill in facing life’s demanding and often difficult questions—always and only—from a balanced and proper view of God and of His teachings in Scripture. This view of life will soundly refute the cliché “I’m so heavenly minded that I’m of no earthly good.” The most effective and functional of Christians is incredibly “heavenly minded.” God created this world, so it seems reasonable to think that, when we approach life from His instructions, we will be effective in our work. “Mr. Preacher” has much to teach us. May we sit at his feet and learn the lesson well. If we learn the lessons that he seeks to “set in order” in our minds, we will discover that *the real message of Ecclesiastes is victory in life, not vanity.*

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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