

Ecclesiastes: The Call to Joy

When I first read in Ecclesiastes, many years ago, I was shocked, but I actually enjoyed the book. In a dark way, I found it refreshing. It seemed so unspiritual, but there it was, right in the Bible. *Why* it was in the Bible, I could not begin to say. It didn't fit, at all.

That is part of the trouble with Ecclesiastes - it does not seem to fit into the Bible.

There are two quite different approaches to Ecclesiastes. The *first* assumes the same thing as we would from every other book in the Bible, that this book is teaching about the true God, and what he has done, and how we should honour God.

It is not easy to make Ecclesiastes fit into this mold, even though we do it with every other book in the Bible. This leads to the *second* approach to Ecclesiastes, which assume that somehow this book is teaching what we should *not* think.

This second approach assumes that Ecclesiastes tells us what like is like *without* faith in God, or, *without* eternity and the gospel, or *without* the resurrection and life after death.

Now, Ecclesiastes never *says* anything like that. It *says* it is telling us how life really is, *and*, what we should do about it. That is what Ecclesiastes *says* it is doing. So, we will take Ecclesiastes at its word. We will take the first approach.

Although not very many Christian commentators do this, let's assume the same about Ecclesiastes that we all assume about the rest of the Bible. That is, let's assume that Ecclesiastes tells us the truth about God and life, and it tells us what to do about it.

Life is a Mist

The Hebrew word *hevel* (= *hebel*) occurs 67 times in the OT according to my concordance, and 33 of those are in Ecclesiastes. *Hevel* means breath, mist, vapour.

Think of the bit of mist that is on a lake, early on a calm morning before the sun is up. Soon after the sun rises, the mist disappears. A bit of breeze also takes that mist away.

Or, think of the vapour that comes up from a hot cup of tea or coffee. Just a little mist, it's there and then it's gone. That's what *hevel* means.

This is the word that the KJV and the NASB translate *vanity* - "vanity of vanities; all is vanity." The NIV and NLT translate it *meaningless* - "meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless."

The reason life is meaningless and vain, according to Ecclesiastes, is that life itself is a mist, a vapour. So Ecclesiastes says a lot about death.

Death comes to all, good and bad die the same way, rich and poor die the same way, wise and foolish die the same way. In fact, the ultimate insult is that humans and animals die in much the same ways. For Ecclesiastes, this is all painful, but we need to learn from it.

It has gotten Ecclesiastes in trouble - it doesn't have any life after death. Well, that is true, but generally speaking no book in the OT has life after death. (But see Eccl 12:7.)

What Ecclesiastes can see is not that there is no life after death. What Ecclesiastes sees is that people live as if this life is eternal. For Ecclesiastes, the way people live would make sense if this life lasted forever.

But this life does not last forever, not at all. This life is *hevel*, a mist, a vapour. At best life is short; and many people die young. And that, says Ecclesiastes, is why most of what people do is foolish.

Furthermore, not only is life itself *hevel*, mist, vapour; but most of what people live for is also *hevel*, mist, vapour. The reasons people have for working are *hevel*. The reasons they have for becoming wise, the reasons they have for getting wealthy - it's all mist.

Work achievements are *hevel*, mist, vapour; wisdom is *hevel*, wealth is *hevel*. By my count, seven of the 33 or 34 times Ecclesiastes uses *hevel*, it adds "a chasing after wind." (Eccl 1:14; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,16; 6:9.) Here are the first two:

1:14 - "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless (*hevel* - all mist, vapour), a chasing after wind." That is, in the big picture, what we work for and life for is a mist, chasing the wind, a wild goose chase.

2:11 - "Yet when I had surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless (*hevel* - mist, vapour), a chasing after wind; nothing was gained under the sun."

So the problem is *not* that life is meaningless, in the normal sense of "meaningless." The problem is that life is short and then disappears.

People work very hard, but what they build and the wealth they collect and the wisdom they gather - it is all like that little mist that comes up from a cup of tea. You can't grab it, can't hold it, can't keep it. You barely see it, and it is gone.

Dave builds houses, but none will last forever. Lance fixes cars, but in 20 years or 2 years they go to the crusher. Marilyn and Vinny wash babies, and wash clothes and dishes, and cook. It is an endless cycle, and no real progress. My own work is like this in many ways.

This is awful. If this is life, and we know he's not far wrong, then what should we do? What do we do with life? Enjoy it! The only thing left is to enjoy life! There is no guarantee that there will be joy, but if there is a chance for joy, take it! Enjoy life!

2:3b "I wanted to see what was worthwhile (Heb *good*) for people to do under heaven during the few days of their lives."

This is important: if life itself is a mist, a vapour, and all that people accomplish is also *hevel*, mist, vapour, then is anything worth doing? Ecclesiastes has an answer, and gives this answer repeatedly, seven times, plus a grand *finalé*.

#1 - 2:24 A man can do nothing better (Heb *nothing more good*) that to eat and drink and to find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

In all of this mist and vapour, satisfaction and enjoyment come from the hand of God. It is a gift from God. Enjoy the basics - food, drink, work. Any chance for joy is straight from God.

#2 - 3:12-13 I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That every man may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil -- this is the gift of God.

"Toil" is an unpleasant word for work. Ecclesiastes is full of "toil." Yet even in toil, a person can experience satisfaction - and *this is a gift from God*. Understand clearly that in Ecclesiastes, working *to accomplish things* is chasing the wind. It is a mist.

The reason to work is to enjoy it, to experience satisfaction as we work. Ecclesiastes says almost everything we do has no other lasting result.

Notice also "be happy *and do good*." Ecclesiastes says to live good lives. The goal is not to seek pleasure. Ecclesiastes is not big into pleasure. Do good, and enjoy the basics.

#3 - 3:22 So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

Other reasons for work are too unpredictable. Your accomplishment will never occur, or it will be destroyed, or given to another. Very few get wealthy by their work. So, enjoy work. There is nothing better.

#4 - 5:18-20 Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given him -- for this is his lot. (19) Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work -- this is a gift of God. (20) He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.

6:1 describes someone who achieved all that was needed for enjoyment, and then died, and left it all to another - this is *hevel*, a grievous evil. Enjoy what you have!

5:19 - "When God gives any one wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them - this is a gift of God." Satisfaction and enjoyment are gifts from God.

In Ecclesiastes, the world is full of tragedy. Nothing new there. In Ecclesiastes, the real tragedy is not that life is short, unfair, and unpredictable. In Ecclesiastes, *the real tragedy* is that God would give a person chances for joy, and a person not take them.

#5 - 8:15 So I commend the enjoyment of life, because is nothing is better (Heb - *more good*) for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.

In Ecclesiastes, the purpose of life is to enjoy life, to experience every chance for satisfaction that God gives. The worse that life looks, and in Ecclesiastes it sure looks bad, the clearer it is that any possibility of any joy is purely a gift from God.

So, since nothing else amounts to anything, and life is short and full of pain, and since God in all this does give chances for enjoyment and gladness, the purpose of life is to enjoy and be glad when we can.

#6 - 9:7 Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a good heart, for it is now that God favours what you do. (*Now is the time -- don't pass it up.*)

#7 - 9:9 Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life (Heb - *all the days of the life of the mist*) that God has given you under the sun -- all your meaningless days (Heb - *all the days of the mist*). For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labour under the sun. (10) Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working or planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

In v9, "meaningless" is inaccurate; "short, difficult, and unpredictable" would be better. That is why people should enjoy life with their spouses. Don't miss a chance for joy.

V10 does not mean necessarily that there is no life after death. It means simply that even if life is better later, the good things of now are over. We only get this chance at the good things now.

I have heard of believers saying things like v10 on their death-beds. They realize then that they hurried too much in life, and worked too hard. Now at the end of their lives, they felt like they wasted some parts of life.

Final Call: 11:7 - 12:1 [read]

"But" occurs in the middle of v9 (*but* know that for all these things . . .). The Hebrew word for "and" is flexible, much more than the English word "and." It can certainly mean "but."

Let's look at the whole of v9. Notice twice the word "and" and once the word "but."

"Be happy, young man, while you are young,
and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.
 Follow the ways of your heart,
and whatever your eyes see,
but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.

The Hebrew construction is identical in all three instances, "and" twice and "but" once. Commentators all defend the "but" near the end of v9 by saying that the context requires it. But it does not. It should be "and" all three times.

Eccl 7:16 warns us against being too righteous. Most of the translators should have taken that more seriously. In my humble opinion. They think Ecclesiastes warns us against sin, at the end of v9. Not so. It warns us against wasting our youth by missing chances for joy.

In this passage, what God will judge people for is not for sin, but for missing chances for enjoyment. Chances for joy and satisfaction are all gifts from God, in the middle of a short and painful life. So take them.

The first line of v10 requires this: "so then, banish anxiety from your heart." Makes no sense if v9 ends with a warning about sin. Here is another translation of 11:9 - "Be happy, young man (and young woman) while you are young, **and** let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart, **and** whatever your eyes see, **and** know that for all these chances for joy God will hold you to account."

Ecclesiastes certainly does not encourage sin, not at all. That has already been made clear, earlier in the book. The great tragedy is that a young person would be too serious, too hardworking, and not enjoy life while they were young, because as they get older their chances for joy get smaller and smaller.

That is the tragedy of Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes, a youth without joy is truly a wasted youth. It's not that youth is all a happy time. Not at all, lots of troubles for young people also. But, young people also have great potential to enjoy the good things of life. He tells them to go ahead full blast. Enjoy what God gives, while you have a chance. This is

"Life is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. **And** let him remember the days of darkness and old age, for they will be many. Everything to come is mist, vapour.

Be happy, young man and woman, while you are young, **and** let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart, **and** whatever your eyes see, **and** know that for all these (chances for joy) God will hold you to account.

So then, banish anxiety from your heart, and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are brief, only a mist.

And (in this way) remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them.'"