

Only Joy Makes Sense
(Ecclesiastes 2 - 9)

Did any of you read any of Ecclesiastes this last week? What did you think? Ecclesiastes teaches that most of what people do makes no sense. It makes sense to the people who are doing it, but only because they are not really thinking.

To Ecclesiastes, it makes no sense. People pour their lives into things, as if there was a certain guarantee or promise. But there is no guarantee or promise, so they are wasting their time. Here are some examples of promises people think are true, but they are not:

"If I could only have more pleasure for myself, more fun, more things that make me feel good, then I'll be happy." It makes sense, doesn't it? Sure. But it is not true.

"If I work hard enough, I'll get richer." "If I work hard enough, I'll have enough to slow down and enjoy life." "If I work hard enough, I'll be able to save my children from having to work so hard." "If I have enough money, life will be good."

Any one of those might be partly true for a person here or there, but as a reason to work hard, they are empty promises. Most people who work hard get none of these things.

"If I am wise enough, I can make sure nothing really bad happens to me." "If I am wise enough, I will be respected." "If I am wise enough, my life will not be like the lives of fools."

These make sense, don't they? Sure. But they're not true. If they are true, it's only for a short time, and then the bottom falls out.

These promises are not true because life itself is *hebel*, a mist and a vapour. People work for these things, but life ends before people get what they worked for.

And, what we work for itself is *hebel*, a mist. We never quite get our hands on it. We always need just a bit more of whatever promise we believe, and *then* life will be good.

What makes Ecclesiastes even more discouraging is that these things bring Solomon pain. These things *should* be promises, they *should* be guarantees, but they are *not*. It is grievous. Solomon despairs over what he sees.

This book is in the Bible to warn us about what is not worth doing. So what *is* worth doing? Eccl 2:2 - "*I wanted to see what was worthwhile for people to do under heaven during the few days of their lives.*"

So, let's see what kind of things to *not* keep their promise; and what things are *hebel*, just mist or vapour (KJV, NASB "vanity;" NIV, NLT "meaningless").

Pleasure is Hebel Eccl 2:1-11 [read]

He tried wine. (The first half of 2:3 is interesting. Literally, it reads "I explored with my heart to lead my body with wine while my heart was guiding with wisdom.")

2:8 - "men and women singers, and a harem" -- wine, women, and song. He tried wealth. He built parks and gardens, houses and pools. All the building projects in 2:4-9 are to build places that would bring pleasure just to be there.

V10a he got everything his eyes desired and his heart wanted. The verdict is in the beginning and at the end - 2:1,11 - it was all *hebel*, mist, vapour; it amounted to nothing. It left him utterly empty.

But, don't miss the second half of v10: "my heart took delight *in all my work*, and this was the reward for all my labour."

The houses, parks, gardens, and pools brought him no pleasure once they were done. *But*, he really did enjoy *building* all this stuff. **And that enjoyment was his reward.**

Wisdom is Hebel Eccl 2:14-16 [read]

The wise person dies the same as the fool, and the wise person is remembered no longer the fool. V15b - "This too is *hebel*, mist, vapour."

3:10-13 Here is another reason that pursuing wisdom is an empty promise: God has put eternity in the hearts of men. People know that there is a big picture. But people can't figure it out. They know there is an answer, but they can't find the answer. Also 8:17.

So, since God made everything beautiful in its time, enjoy the beauty, and do what is right. 3:12 - "there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live." *This is the gift of God* (v13c) - *There is nothing better* - (v12a).

9:13-16 A sad little story, and another reason why wisdom is over-rated. Wisdom is useful and powerful, but be careful what you assume it will bring to you. It did not bring this man very much.

Work is Hebel Eccl 2:17-25 [read]

In vv17-23 the word "meaningless," *hebel*, occurs 4 times. Work is really bad, in Ecclesiastes. And it is also the most regular source of joy, as we saw in vv24-25.

The satisfaction and enjoyment of work are a direct gift of God. In Ecclesiastes, the best is to do what is right, and to taste the enjoyment of life and work as it comes.

Because this enjoyment and satisfaction come from God, it is the pleasant duty of people to enjoy these things. See also 3:22.

Achievement is Hebel Eccl 4:4-6 [read]

V4 - "everything comes from envy."

We think this is not true of us, but I wonder. If everyone around me had a smaller dumpier house than I do, I'd be more likely to be content with mine. If everyone around me had a vehicle that was older and in worse shape, I'd more likely be content.

And you are not much different from me. Fill in the blanks - clothes, tools, toys of any kind, for children and adults both.

Here's another example: suppose you work at something you do well, and you find some enjoyment in it. Then someone comes along who is good at the very same thing you are good at, in fact, they are better than you at the very thing you are good at.

Your job, if it is a job, isn't threatened. You can keep doing what you do. But people around can see that this other person is actually better than you at the very thing you saw as yours. That takes some of the joy out of our lives. We don't handle that very well.

4:5 says "don't be lazy - it'll be the end of you."

4:6 says, "but don't work too hard, either. Slow down, relax. It's better."

Promotion is Hebel Eccl 4:13-16 [read]

Everyone was so happy when the foolish old king was finally off the throne, and the poor but wise youth was king instead. Did the poor wise youth have it made?

Not really. All the people that came ahead of him never even heard of him, and the people who came along while he was already king thought he was an old fool, and they all wanted someone else.

Promotions are *hebel*, meaningless. They are a mist, a vapour.

Wealth is Hebel Eccl 5:10-20 [read]

Vv10-11 are great. V10 - if the goal is to have just a little more money, we will never have enough.

V11 - the more we own, the more people there are that live off our money. The joy of the owner is to watch it happen!

V18 is the repeated advice of the book of Ecclesiastes: find satisfaction in eating and drinking and working. V19 might seem to contradict verse 10, but it does not. Verse 10 is about a person who loves money, who loves wealth.

Look for a minute at 10:19. Ecclesiastes has lots of respect for money. Money solves lots of problems. Having enough money helps life in lots of different ways.

Back to 5:10 - This is about the person who *loves* money and *loves* wealth, that is, the person who *arranges their life substantially* to have more money, more wealth.

People who arrange their lives to have more money and wealth are pursuing some kind of satisfaction, some kind of enjoyment, *and they will never get it.* They simply will never get that satisfaction and enjoyment. It is a promise that is really a lie.

5:19-20 Some people get money and wealth without being the people of 5:10, without making money and wealth their purpose. *It is given to them by God.*

If a person has enough money and wealth, and has the ability to enjoy it, *the pleasant duty of that person before God is to enjoy it and be happy in their work.*

V18a - "this is good and proper." V19a - "when God gives . . . and enables . . ." V19c - "this is a gift of God." V20b - "God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart."

Summary - Enjoy your Food, Drink, Family, and Work Eccl 9:7-12 [read 9:11-12]

Vv11-12 These two verses summarize why promises we live by are false.

V11 - too many big things are beyond our control. Our plan makes sense, but something else happens and it wrecks our plan. And it *often* happens.

V12 - this is quite similar to v11, but nastier. Bad things happen, real bad, and they come suddenly, unexpectedly. This verse speaks mostly about unexpected death.

Our plans assume life will go on peacefully as it is for a long time, and there will be no big surprises. That is silly. So, how should we live?

Vv7-10 [read] Enjoy your food, your drink, your family, and your work. V10 does not mean there is no afterlife. It means that *this life*, and the basic things to enjoy of this life, will most certainly be over. We will never get any of those chances back.

Don't ignore a chance for enjoyment or satisfaction on the basis of a promise that is false, a guarantee that is not guaranteed. This is our pleasant duty, our joyful task from God.