

What Is Good for People to Do?  
Ecclesiastes 1-2

Turn to Ecclesiastes 1. Ecclesiastes has a negative message and a positive message. Most of the message is negative, but there are positive parts throughout, and the end is very positive. But the positive parts do not work well unless we take seriously the discouraging part of message.

When I first read 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 I agreed with a lot of it, and there it was, right in the Bible. Why that 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 very different approaches to Ecclesiastes. The first approach 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 God has done, and how we should honour God. That is how we will read Ecclesiastes.

It is not easy to make Ecclesiastes fit into this mold, even though we do it with every other book in the Bible. In the Bible, Ecclesiastes is so unconventional. It is disturbing. Even when we think it's probably right, we don't think writing like that should be in the Bible

This leads to the second approach to Ecclesiastes, which assumes that this book is teaching what we should *not* think. This second approach believes that Ecclesiastes tells us what life is like *without* faith in God, or, *without* eternity and the gospel, or *without* life after death.

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.

A problem with saying this is life *without* faith in God is that some parts of Ecclesiastes are entirely conventional. Ecclesiastes is always respectful of God, and says several times that God will judge everything, good or bad. So the people who don't want to take it all at face value have to say that someone added right parts later. That doesn't work well either.

It was as unconventional and disruptive to Old Testament Jews as it is to us, and they put it in their Bible. So let's assume that Ecclesiastes tells us the truth about God and life, and it also 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. When the sun rises, the mist disappears. 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 some translate vanity - "vanity of vanities; all is vanity." Some translate it meaningless - "meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless." Another translation is "useless" – "useless, useless, everything is useless."

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 sees 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.

In Eccl 7:2 the Teacher says, "Death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart." That's at the center of Ecclesiastes. We ignore our destiny, and live as if this life will last and last. Furthermore, death is completely unpredictable.

"As no one has power over the wind to contain it, so no one has power over their time of death" (8:8). We cannot control death. We want to make our lives longer, but we know that people who do everything right die young, and those that do everything wrong live long healthy lives.

"No one knows when their hour will come. As fish are caught in a net, or birds are taken in a snare, so people are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly on them" (9:12). Life itself is *hevel*, just a brief mist, a vapour. It is short at best, and unpredictable.

The Teacher tells us this ultimately not to discourage us, but so we'll listen to his advice. He's going to tell us what to do about this, but not before he gives us a strong dose of reality. We know this is all true, we just don't like to hear it.

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*, useless. The reasons for becoming wise, the reasons for getting wealthy - it's all mist.

Work achievements are useless; wisdom is useless and wealth is useless because they do not make life longer or more predictable. By my count, seven of the many 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, a chasing after wind.*" That is, in the big picture, what we work for and live for is a mist, chasing the wind, a wild goose chase. We're not thinking about what life is actually like.

2:11 - "*Yet when I had surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, 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.

### Under the Sun

The Old Testament uses this phrase "under the sun" 31x, and 27 of them are in Ecclesiastes. The Teacher says what happens "under the sun." Some take "under the sun" to mean "life without God." That is nonsense, Ecclesiastes speaks often of God, take note if you read it through.

"Under the sun" means there is a lot we don't know about why things happen as they do. "God only knows, God makes his plan, the information's unavailable to the mortal man." That's from a Paul Simon song, but the Teacher of Ecclesiastes would agree. There's a lot we don't know about what God is doing. We only see what's under the sun, and much of what happens under the sun makes no sense. Given that, how should we live?

Is Work the Answer? No.

*So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to one who comes after me. And who knows if that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will control the fruit of my toil. This too is meaningless. So my heart began to despair over all my labor under the sun. For a person may labor with wisdom and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.*

We know this is true, but we don't want to read that in the Bible! And I can't help thinking that life has changed very little in 3000 years. There truly is nothing new under the sun. 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?

What is Good for People to Do?

2:3b *"I wanted to see what was good for people to do under heaven during the few days of their lives."* The Hebrew word for "good" is *tov* (rhymes with "stove"). It gets translated several ways in Ecclesiastes, but we will say "good" every time.

Given that life is brief, unpredictable, painful, and disappointing, *what is good for people to do?* The Teacher says it again in 6:12 – *"Who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few and meaningless days they pass through like a shadow."* What is good for a person to do in life?

I Commend the Enjoyment of Life – 8:15

Is anything worth doing? Ecclesiastes has an answer, and gives this answer repeatedly, seven times, plus a grand finalé. The Teacher recommends that we enjoy life.

#1 - 2:24 "A person can do *nothing more good* than to eat and drink and to find satisfaction ("good") in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?" Satisfaction and enjoyment come from the hand of God. They are gifts from God. Enjoy the basics - food, drink, work. These chances are gifts from God.

#2 - 3:12-13 "I know that there is *nothing more good* for people than to be happy and do *good* while they live. That each one may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their 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. In Ecclesiastes, working to accomplish things is chasing the wind. It is a mist. The reason to work is to experience satisfaction as we work. Ecclesiastes says almost everything we do has no other useful 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 more good* for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their 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, and what's worse, only a few of the wealthy actually enjoy their wealth. So, enjoy work. There is nothing better.

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

6:1-6 describes another evil under the sun: God gives some people wealth and possessions, so they lack nothing their hearts desire, but God does not give them the ability to enjoy these! Strangers enjoy these things instead! This ends in 6:6, where we read that even if a person lives a thousand years twice over, if they fail to enjoy their prosperity, they would have been better off if they had been a still born child.

We just read, "When God gives any one wealth and possessions, and enables them 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 satisfaction and joy, and the person not take them. The person instead would work hard and be diligent. And for what? That's real tragedy.

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

In Ecclesiastes, the purpose of life is to experience every chance for satisfaction that God gives. The worse that life looks, and in Ecclesiastes life sure looks bad, the clearer it is that any possibility of joy is 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 God has already approved 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 short difficult life that God has given you under the sun -- all the days of your mist. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labour under the sun. 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." Not all have a spouse, but all have friends or family they love.

Here's the point of the grave here: these chances for enjoyment will never come back. We could have experienced enjoyment this last week. That was the best thing to do, but we did something else instead. In 1 Timothy, Paul writes, "Don't put your hope in wealth, for God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." Sounds almost like Ecclesiastes.

Grand Finale – 11:7 – 12:1

Here's the conclusion of Ecclesiastes about this matter. I will read it and we'll be done. It is especially aimed at young people

*Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.  
However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all.  
And let them remember the days of darkness to come, for there will be many.  
Everything to come is meaningless.*

*You who are young, be happy 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,  
Because, for all these gifts, God will bring you into judgment.  
So then, banish anxiety from your heart, and cast off the troubles of your body,  
for youth and vigor are a fleeting breath.*

*While you are still young, remember what your Creator wishes for you,  
before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say,  
"I find no pleasure in them."  
Amen.*

PRAYER: God, we're not used to hearing things like this. A part of us surely knows that life can be as short and disappointing as Ecclesiastes says. Of that there's no doubt. And God, you have shown us the way forward. You are still giving these ordinary chances for satisfaction and enjoyment. You have richly provided us with many things to enjoy. Show us that we are obliged before you to take you up on these. Thank you for the clarity of this book. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the] Lord.