

Life in the Mist

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Far from proclaiming the meaninglessness of life, the Preacher in Ecclesiastes calls his people to fear God and find joy in the mist. Solomon confronts the uncontrollable nature of this world with all of its pain and shadows, and comes out the other side full of satisfaction and hope.

Authorship & Outline

The author identifies himself as *Qohelet*, “the Preacher,” the son of David and king in Jerusalem (vv. 1, 12). *Qohelet* relates to the word *qahal*, meaning “congregation”, so *Qohelet* is a gatherer, assembler, and preacher to the people of God. “Ecclesiastes” similarly relates to *ecclesia*, the Greek word for “church.” This is a book for the gathered church to learn to live wisely and full of joy. Solomon was an enormously blessed king who instead of asking for riches and honor, asked for wisdom from God, and so received it and everything else: “so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you” (1 Kgs. 3:12-13). Unfortunately, his great wisdom did not lead to great obedience. He loved many foreign women who drew him and Israel into idolatry, eventually resulting in the divided kingdom (1 Kgs. 11:1-13). The book of Ecclesiastes was written in his advanced age, demonstrating a repentant heart and sound counsel to those who would not repeat his folly. It addresses the world with all of its hard and potentially frustrating edges. Cynics grab on to the dark truths in Ecclesiastes, glib people only quote the happy verses, and unbelievers miss the point: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all” (12:13). Solomon describes the inscrutable nature of the world and our inability to control what happens to us, and yet he directs us to trust God anyway and thereby experience profound joy in His ordinary gifts. Ecclesiastes divides into four parts.

- I. 1:1-2:26 God alone provides satisfaction in a world totally out of our control.
- II. 3:1-5:20 The Lord is sovereign over all people, times, and places, however unclear to some.
- III. 6:1-8:15 Having strength and wealth does not mean you have the power to enjoy them.
- IV. 8:16-12:14 Last, he addresses challenges and difficulties, and the need to seek wisdom and live joyfully despite them. This is the gift of God.

Each of these parts drives to a conclusion, and only by following the argument carefully do you arrive at it. Wisdom literature is like Jesus’ parables, lighting the way for the humble but confounding the proud (Matt. 13:10-15, 34).

Hevel of Hevels

After the introduction, the book begins with the famous phrase, “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher; ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’” (v. 2). Solomon uses this word *hevel* over 35 times in Ecclesiastes, and rather than “meaninglessness” (as the NIV translates it), it means mist, vapor, or breath. It’s a whisp of a thing that is here in a moment and then gone. It’s typically out of your reach, and if you try to grab it it slips through your fingers. You cannot control it. This is very different from what we typically mean by vanity in the sense of pointlessness, or the moral sense meaning conceit and self-centeredness. A vanity mirror is one you sit at to focus on your face. For people trying to define themselves and find ultimate meaning in profit from their labor (v. 3) or the next “new” thing (v. 10), life really is completely meaningless. But even for the one

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who knows God and find their identity in Him, life is still a mist and totally uncontrollable. There are two opposite errors in understanding Ecclesiastes. The first reads the blunt and hard descriptions as something you totally overcome and don't experience if you trust God. The second misses the gift of faith that allows the believer to thrive and enjoy despite the vanity of this life. Consider Solomon's conclusion: "Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind" (2:24-26). "*Hevel of hevels*" is a superlative comparison like "King of kings and Lord of lords." Solomon describes the vaporousness of profit and new things, but despite that, God gives the one who does good the ability to eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of his labor.

What Profit?

What advantage or leverage (*yithron*) does a man get from his labor? A generation comes and goes, and the next one largely forgets, while the earth just remains (vv. 3-4). Do huge profits change this? Does your life extend into the next generation because you're rich? How many more breaths will you take as a result of your hard work? The sun goes up and down, up and down; the wind whirls north and south, then repeats; the rivers run in and out, not filling the sea, and then rinse and repeat (vv. 5-7). Wear your clothes today and then put them in the laundry, wash and fold, then do it again. Also the dishes. Maintain the car. Cut the grass. Make the meal. We get weary with the repetition, having seen and heard it again for the thousandth if not the millionth time (v. 8). Jeff Meyers compares our labors to building sandcastles. Children unaware that the tide is coming are devastated when their work is destroyed. But the wise take this into account.

Nothing New Under the Sun

Some try to escape the vapor of repetition by running after the next new thing: "See, this is new" (v. 10). But it's not. Solomon knows technology advances, but these changes happen to the same things—travel, medicine, art, stories, etc. People have been pursuing these things since ancient times, and no one will remember when the iPhone came out (vv. 10-11). If you do the best thing you can hope to do, no one will remember you.

Conclusion

The greater Solomon did not love many strange women, and His kingdom is not divided. Jesus is the gift of God, and in Him you can get up and enjoy making the coffee, again, and sit down at end of the day to enjoy the fruit of your labor, laughing at the vain repetition. To know and do this is true grace only given by the triune God.