

Ecclesiastes I: *Introduction to the Preacher and “Life Under the Sun”*

“Wisdom Literature asks, what does it mean to fear the Lord in the world the Lord has made? Along with Job, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes is a meditation on what it means to be alive in a world that God made and called good, yet which has also gone so very wrong in catastrophic ways”

--David Gibson, *Living Life Backwards*

The Meaning of *Hebel* Translated “Vanity”

- “Meaningless” is not an adequate translation of *Hebel*.
- Its literal meaning is “breath” or “breeze”.

Psalm 39:5-6, 11

You have made my life no longer than the width of my hand. My entire lifetime is just a moment to you; at best, each of us is but a breath.”⁶ We are merely moving shadows, and all our busy rushing ends in nothing. We heap up wealth, not knowing who will spend it. ¹¹ When you discipline us for our sins, you consume like a moth what is precious to us. Each of us is but a breath [*hebel*].

Psalm 144:3-4

O Lord, what are human beings that you should notice them,
mere mortals that you should think about them?

⁴ For they are like a breath of air [*hebel*];
their days are like a passing shadow.

- **Life is Short**

James 4:13-14

Look here, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.” How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it’s here a little while, then it’s gone.

Proverbs 30:31

Charm is deceptive, and beauty does not last [*hebel*]; but a woman who fears the Lord will be greatly praised.

- **Life is Elusive**

- Hard to grab on to or gain control of in terms of lasting significance...
- We can pour our whole lives into something and it may succeed, or it may fail...
- Mid-Life Crises, Control, Meaning, Legacy...
- **The Question: Eccl. 1:3 *What do people get for all their hard work under the sun?***

• Life is Repetitive

1:4-11

Generations come and generations go, but the earth never changes. ⁵The sun rises and the sun sets, then hurries around to rise again. ⁶The wind blows south, and then turns north. Around and around it goes, blowing in circles. ⁷Rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full. Then the water returns again to the rivers and flows out again to the sea. ⁸Everything is wearisome beyond description. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content. ⁹History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. ¹⁰Sometimes people say, “Here is something new!” But actually, it is old; nothing is ever truly new. ¹¹We don’t remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now.

- There is this repeating rhythm of life that goes on and on...
- The experience of observing constant motion without lasting achievement is so wearisome that no amount of explaining can describe it.
 - **The Implied answer to the question in 1:3 is “nothing!”**
 - **But the Preacher assures us that there is an elusive “something” in all the repetitive rhythms of life...**

3:9-11

⁹**What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?** ¹⁰I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves.

¹¹He has made everything appropriate in its time. **He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.**

“Life Under the Sun”

- Many have interpreted Ecclesiastes as a message of what life looks like without God.
 - That the preacher is speaking from the secularist, unbeliever’s perspective
 - **But nowhere is that suggested in Ecclesiastes**
- Instead, the Preacher makes the point over and over that It’s the **SAME for EVERYONE** (See **2:13-14; 3:19; 9:2; Matthew 5:45; Luke 13:1-5**)
 - So **“Life Under the Sun”** in some ways may best be understood as a temporal marker.
 - This is how things are **“now”** and **“here”**
- **Being a Christian does not stop these things from being true. In fact, the Preacher is making sure that we stop pretending that is true.**
- The Preacher is carefully laying the groundwork for the primary argument of the book.
- **Our lives are full of vanity, AND we are going to die.**

- **The reality is we spend our lives trying to escape these constraints of our created condition.**

“Our excesses are the best clues to our own poverty, and our best way of concealing it from ourselves...” – Adam Philips

- **To be human is to be a creature, and to be finite.**
- **We are not God.**
- **We are not in control.**
- **We will not live forever.**
- **We will die.**

So, if we won't live forever, or even long enough to make a lasting, memorable difference to the world, how then should we live?

“Bursting the Bubble” and “Chasing the Wind”

(1:12-18)

¹²I, the Teacher, was king of Israel, and I lived in Jerusalem. ¹³I devoted myself to search for understanding and to explore by wisdom everything being done under heaven. I soon discovered that God has dealt a tragic existence to the human race. ¹⁴I observed everything going on under the sun, and really, it is all meaningless—like chasing the wind.

¹⁵What is wrong cannot be made right.
What is missing cannot be recovered.

¹⁶I said to myself, “Look, I am wiser than any of the kings who ruled in Jerusalem before me. I have greater wisdom and knowledge than any of them.” ¹⁷So I set out to learn everything from wisdom to madness and folly. But I learned firsthand that **pursuing all this is like chasing the wind.**

¹⁸The greater my wisdom, the greater my grief.
To increase knowledge only increases sorrow.

- **This may seem or feel depressing at first glance...**

But the Preacher is building a case, to help the reader discover and understand the ultimate truth that will eventually lead to ultimate freedom.

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
Round and round he sped.
I was disturbed at this;
I accosted the man.
‘It is futile,’ I said,
‘You can never—’
‘You lie!’ he cried,
And ran on.

--Stephen Crane