

Finding Meaning in Life: An Overview of Ecclesiastes

One of the most anticipated times of the year for me is Christmas. Often it is the one time of the year when all our kids and grandkids are able to be together with us. Three of our kids live in CO and so it is hard to get us all together. And so, there is often great anticipation of being together. Many of you know exactly what I'm talking about, right? I look forward sitting around drinking coffee together in the morning, or the late-night game of Settlers, or working on the puzzle while eating Christmas cookies, or playing with sweet grandkids.

Such times are so good and enjoyable, and yet, they are never quite as good as I anticipate. There are still little frustrations and things that don't go as I had hoped. And the time just goes by so fast and then they are gone again. And once they are gone I often find that I have this little ache in my heart that is more than just a longing for more time with them. It is an ache that our time together, as good as it is, is never quite as good as I'd hoped for.

What is this? What is going on? Why the ache? Why the small measure of disappointment? I believe it is because I'm experiencing a taste of what the book of Ecclesiastes describes about life in a broken world. I'm looking to an experience to fill up my satisfaction bucket in a way that experiences never can in this world.

We are in the midst of a series entitled *Becoming Wise: A Matter of Life and Death*. We've spent three weeks in Proverbs. Last week Steve looked at Job and what it means to walk in wisdom in the midst of our suffering. Today we are looking at Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes can be a strange and confusing book if we don't look at it carefully. Some people read it and wonder why it is in the Bible. It seems so pessimistic. Others deeply connect to it because it captures what they have experienced in life. However you have heard this book, it is God's word to us. And it is incredibly relevant to our day when we are tempted to look for meaning in life in all the wrong places.

What I want to do is to give us a basic understanding of what is going on in this book so that we can hear its message for us today. Understanding the overall structure is vital to rightly understanding the message of the book. In my understanding there are two voices in Ecclesiastes.

I. The Framework of Ecclesiastes: Two Voices

There is someone called *the Preacher* (NIV - Teacher). Traditionally, this has been understood to be Solomon. Obviously, Solomon was known for his wisdom. And much that we read in this book would seem to speak of Solomon's experience. However, nowhere in the book is the name, Solomon, used and there are things said in the book that would be hard to see coming from Solomon. And so, because of these things conservative commentators disagree about who wrote this book. Some believe the Preacher refers to Solomon, others to a later king, and still others believe that the Preacher is later wise person seeking to present wisdom in the tradition

of Solomon. Whether or not this first voice is Solomon, this book is the inspired word of God to us. I'm just going to refer to this first voice as the Preacher.

Most of Ecclesiastes is a presentation of what the Preacher taught (1:3-12:7), however, the words of the Preacher are bracketed, or framed, by another voice at the beginning and ending of the book. In 1:1-2 we read:

¹ *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*

² *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

These are words **about** the Preacher, not the words **of** the Preacher. This second voice is saying that he going to present the words of the Preacher. This voice has been called the Frame Narrator because he frames the whole discussion. It is this voice that contains the central message of the book that we will see in the epilogue where he evaluates the Preacher's message.

And so, what I want to do is to first look at the words of the Preacher and understand what he taught. And then we will look at what the Frame Narrator has to say about what the Preacher taught. And so, let's look at the . . .

A. The First Voice: The Words of the Preacher (1:12-12:7)

This first voice introduces himself and his intent in 1:12:

¹² *I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.* ¹³ *And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.* ¹⁴ *I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.*

He tells us both his intent and his conclusion here. His intent is to search out *by wisdom all that is done under heaven*. He is searching for meaning in life in mankind's activities. He will explore things like work, pleasure, accomplishments, wealth, and status.

He also tells us that his focus is on *all that is done under heaven*. He uses a similar phrase in verse 14, where he says he has *seen everything that is done under the sun*. Twenty-eight times he will use this phrase. The Preacher is not atheistic; he talks about God, but as he reflects on life, his observations are limited to what he sees happening on earth. He is seeing these things for the most part without reference to God's revelation or anything beyond this worldly experience. It is an *under the sun* perspective.

This is his intent, but he also tells us right from the start his conclusion – *all is vanity and a striving after wind*. Have you ever tried to grab the wind. You can't, right? There is nothing of substance of which you can grab hold. His conclusion is that life is like that. *All is vanity*.

Some of your translations might say, “meaningless,” or, “futility.” No one English word captures the full sense of this word. In the original language of Hebrew the word is, *hevel*. It literally means “mist,” or “vapor.” It is used metaphorically of something that is fleeting. To get a sense of this word and the ways the Preacher uses it, I want to read a few passages.

In 5:10, He says:

¹⁰ He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.

You think that to have money would satisfy and so you work to have it, but once you do, you realize that it does not satisfy. There is no real substance there. The result is not what you expect. This is *hevel*.

One of the topics he repeatedly returns to is work. He says this in 2:18-21:

¹⁸ I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, ¹⁹ and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.

“I’ve worked hard. I’ve used wisdom in my toil. And yet in the end all that I’ve acquired might all end up in the hands of a fool.” This makes no sense to him. This is unfair and frustrating. This is *hevel*.

In 2:13-16 he talks about how time and death are these great equalizers that seem to make the pursuit of wisdom meaningless.

¹³ Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. ¹⁴ The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. ¹⁵ Then I said in my heart, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?” And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. ¹⁶ For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!

He says that wisdom is better than folly. And yet, *the same event happens to all of them*. Whether you are wise or a fool, both die and both are forgotten. And so really, what’s the point of wisdom? Even wisdom seems meaningless in light of death. Again, this makes no sense. It is an enigma. This is *hevel*.

This is just a small sampling of the what the Preacher finds as he explores how one might find meaning in all sorts of areas of life. He continues to bump up against is frustration, emptiness, injustice, and things that just do not make sense. And so, his overall assessment is that all is *hevel*. Life is meaningless.

In a sense you can summarize his message as “Life is hard and then we die.” That’s a cheerful message, isn’t it? And yet we feel the truth of this sometimes as we walk through this life. We experience these same frustrations. Things do not turn out like we expect. What we thought would satisfy doesn’t.

If this is your experience, what do you do? Well, the Preacher has a perspective that we need to hear. The Preacher doesn’t just say “life is hard and then you die,” rather, he communicates that “Life is hard and then you die, and because this is true, if you find the ability to enjoy some simple pleasures in life, then by all means do so.” For instance, in 5:18 he says:

¹⁸ Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. ¹⁹ Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God.

He states this conclusion several times in the book (e.g., 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9). Find enjoyment in the simple things. In a meal. In your work. In your loved ones. Life is so hard, and disappointing, and fleeting in this fallen world, and so don’t miss the simple pleasures of enjoyment when you can. To find pleasure in any of these things is a good gift from God

This is the message of this first voice. We need to hear this message. Genesis 3 tells us that after Adam and Eve sinned God cast them out of the Garden and the earth was subjected to futility. Work became hard. The ground was cursed. Thorns and thistles. Paul tells us in Romans 8:20 that creation was subjected to futility. We are not living in the Garden. This world does not work like it was originally designed by God. And yet so often we believe it should. We anticipate that a job, or money, or a relationship, or certain experiences will truly satisfy us, and yet they don’t. We experience life as hard and frustrating and confusing.

If we are hearing the Preacher’s message, we should begin to ask, “If meaning in life is not found in my work, or acquiring possessions or wealth, or in status, or experiencing great pleasures like trips or other such things, where can it be found? If all of this is *hevel*, grasping at the wind, where can I find something of substance?”

This leads us to the second voice; the Frame Narrator’s voice. It’s in his message that we get an answer.

B. The Second Voice: The Words of the Frame Narrator (12:9-14)

As we come to the epilogue in chapter 12, we see that the Frame Narrator is speaking to his son like the father in Proverbs. He uses the Preacher's teachings to give his son a lesson on life and on wisdom. Let's look at what he says. In 12:9, he says:

⁹ Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. ¹⁰ The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

He affirms that the Preacher was a wise man and that he did do good work as he collected and arranged proverbs. He affirms that the Preacher *sought to find* and communicate words of truth. All of this is commendable. And then he says:

¹¹ The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.

His point is that the words of the wise are useful. They can get you moving the right direction like a *goad*. And they provide stability like *nails firmly fixed*. And so it is good to be exposed to the teachings of the wise. But the Frame Narrator communicates that the Preacher's wisdom only goes so far. Verse 12:

¹² My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. ¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard.

The Frame Narrator essentially says, "Enough of this! We've heard enough of this under the sun perspective." And then he speaks the core message that he wants his son and us to understand.

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Meaning in life is not found in all the things the Preacher explored, but in establishing a right relationship with God in which we relate to God with respect and awe and move towards God and pay attention to Him. We find meaning in this world through a relationship with God and walking in a way that pleases and honors Him. This is *the whole duty of man*.

The father adds one other thought that helps us as we live in a world where it seems like there is no real advantage to walking in wisdom. He says:

¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

He is urging his son to have a perspective greater than the under the sun outlook of the Preacher. He is urging a future-oriented focus. There is more going on than what we observe in this world. *Under the sun*, the Preacher concludes that walking in wisdom or foolishness makes no difference because in the end everyone dies. And so what's the point of walking in wisdom?

All DO die, but that is not the end of the story. There is judgment. *God will bring every deed into judgment.* This means that all our actions do have meaning. And God will set all things right.

Fear God and keep his commandments. And live in light of the truth that there is a future judgment coming. It is in our relationship with God that we find meaning in life. This is the message of Ecclesiastes.

II. Application

Here's the question for you, where are you seeking to find meaning in life? What are you looking to satisfy you? Are you seeking such things in work, experiences, money, or success? Or are you seeking it in God?

The Frame Narrator essentially lays before his son two options. Now the son has a choice. He can ignore the father's wisdom and try for himself to find meaning in all the things that the Preacher explored. He can believe that he will have a different result and yet the truth is he will not. He too will find all those things meaningless. His second option is to heed the wisdom of his father, and from early on orient his life around seeking and obeying God.

We are to hear the message of this book from the perspective of this son. And like him, you have two options. What will you do? Will you disregard what the Preacher discovered that all pursuits in this life apart from God will not ultimately satisfy; that all of them are a kind of grasping at the wind? Will you hear the message that this world is broken and that the results of our efforts will often be frustrated and different than what you expect? Or will you press on thinking that for you it will be different? That once you get that job, or make enough money, or find that right relationship that then you will be good; then you will be satisfied? Or will you choose to listen to the Frame Narrator understanding that it is only in a relationship with God that your life will have meaning? What will you choose?

Many of you know the story of John 4 where Jesus encounters the woman at the well. He strikes up a conversation with her by asking for a drink. She was shocked that he, a Jew and a man, would ask her, a Samaritan woman, for a drink. In reply Jesus said:

¹⁰ . . . "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

As Jesus continues his conversation with this woman trying to help her see her deepest need, he reveals to her that he knows that she has had five husbands and that the man she now lives with is not her husband. This woman had experienced the futility of life. She had gone from husband to husband looking for something, but never finding it. But now she meets the One who is living water. The One who truly satisfies. And her life is changed. In fact because of her testimony, her whole village is changed. Jesus is the one who satisfies. Jesus is the one who reverses the futility that this world was subject to due to sin.

One commentator says it this way:

As he was hanging on the cross, he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mark 15:34). At this point, Jesus experienced the meaninglessness of this world in a way that [the Preacher] could not imagine. Jesus did this in order to break the curse of that meaninglessness in our life. His resurrection infuses life with new meaning. In short, Jesus, the Messiah, is the answer to the problem expressed by the Teacher's cry, "meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless."

(Konkel & Longman, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 6)

His resurrection infuses life with new meaning. Jesus is living water. He is soul-satisfying living water for all who will trust him and seek him. In this world subject to futility, in this world that so often doesn't seem to work the way it is supposed to, in this world where all other pursuits come up empty, Jesus, and Jesus alone, gives ultimate satisfaction and meaning in life. Trust him. Seek him. Walk with him.