

# Ecclesiastes - Vapor, vanity, and the gift of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] The word ecclesiastes is Greek for the gathered, the gathered, or the gatherer.

You can hear the word ECC, the ecclesiology. It's talking about ecclesia, the church. The word just typically means the people gathered for a religious assembly.

The name of the writer of this book is withheld from us in terms of a specific person's name, but his title is presented to us as Kohileth, which is simply the preacher or the speaker.

And what is the preacher or the speaker talking about in Ecclesiastes? He is talking, I think, in a way similar to what you might think of as an Old Testament Hebrew TED talk.

He's just run an experiment. There are two big experiments in this section of the Bible. I don't know if you've ever thought about this before, but in this wisdom section, there's two big experiments.

[ 1 : 03 ] And the first is, what happens if you take everything away from somebody? And the second is, what happens if you give everything to somebody? And these are kind of almost bookends of the wisdom literature, this experiments between Job and Ecclesiastes.

What happens when you take everything away? What, what, what, where does that kind of life lead to? And what happens if you give everything to somebody? Where, where does that lead to? I think you'd be surprised to see they both lead to the same place.

If there's a happy ending, they both have to lead to God. That's, that's the only way that either of those approaches work. Now, Job obviously was not a willing participant in his experiment, but we see very clearly that the preacher in Ecclesiastes is.

Look at verse 12 of chapter 1. So he is actually running the experiment consciously.

He is looking at the whole world, at all the possible avenues of activities that we could engage in.

And he is trying to figure out what should a person do with his short time on the earth.

[ 2 : 29 ] His main conclusion, in terms of a negative conclusion, is that everything, to one degree or another, is hebel. That's the Hebrew word that is translated in our Bibles as vanity.

He says, 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.

Verse 14. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and is striving after the wind. A meaning of the word hebel or vanity is disputed.

I don't think that it's disputed for good reason, but there is a lot of controversy. When you crack open a commentary on Ecclesiastes, he's way too much time devoted to the name of the author, which isn't given to us, and then a lot of time spent on what does this word vanity mean?

It appears so often in the book, you can see why commentators would want to understand what this word means. I believe that it's pretty close to its original meaning and the meaning that's used throughout the rest of Scripture, and that is simply, it is a misty vapor.

[ 3 : 37 ] Life is a misty vapor. What does he mean by that? Well, I think we have to talk about the water cycle. When did we learn about the water cycle in science class? Was that, again, homeschoolers accepted you didn't learn science, but, no, I'm kidding.

Like, when did we learn about that? Was that like maybe fifth grade? Does anybody remember when we learned about the water cycle? Any teachers here? Fourth, fifth grade, something like that? Okay. You can kind of picture that in your head, that, you know, there's this cyclical nature of water, and that ties in with this word, Hebel, in some respects, but I think we have no other choice but to think that's what he's talking about.

Because look at verse 2 of chapter 1. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises. There's a cyclical view of life in

Ecclesiastes, but here's where I'm getting something about the water cycle.

Look at verse 6. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north, and around and around goes the wind. And on its circuit, the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full.

[ 5 : 01 ] To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. Well, that's exactly what we were taught when we learned about the water cycle in class, right?

That there's something happening where the water that comes from the streams winds up in the sea, and yet the sea never overfills. What happens? Well, some of that water returns back to its source.

He's talking about the cyclical nature of things. And then in verse 8, There's this constant lack of completion, of consummation, of total fulfillment.

Verse 9, Now look at verse 12, chapter 1.

Well, now we have that phrase is going to come up over and over and over again.

[ 6 : 37 ] Vanity and a striving after the wind. He's just talking about the elusive, evaporative nature of all the good things in life.

They're there, and then they're not there. The one translator says, if you're really, or not translator, theologian, says, if you're really trying to nail the vibe of this phrase, striving after the wind, you'd say, this is like shepherding the wind.

This is like trying to manage or steer the wind. It's impossible. And so the writer of Ecclesiastes is observing that the world is simply full of pleasures that are fleeting.

And if you think about it, if you're living in a Middle Eastern arid climate with plenty of wind and plenty of sun, you know, your need for water is the same as everybody else's just about.

I don't think we've had serious dune mutations yet in real life where you can survive on a thimble of water every day. So your need for water is like everybody else's.

[ 7 : 44 ] Your attention to water is different, though, because you live in the kind of environment where a puddle appearing in the morning will be gone by the evening. Everything you need seems to be elusive, slipping past your fingers.

You want water. You need water. It just doesn't last very long. And for the preacher, the world feels like a closed system of fleeting pleasures. Now, he really wants us to take his word for these things. You know, if you've ever read a medical journal or some kind of a study, you'll see that there's a huge section in all these experimental literature about their methodology. They want you to know that they conducted the research in a fair way, trying to accommodate for, you know, various sorts of placebo effects and so on and so forth.

They just want you to see that they really tried to give you a good data set. And that's actually a lot of what's going on in the book of Ecclesiastes. If you ask me, what's the book of Ecclesiastes about?

It's like it's about a guy running an experiment and telling us how sound his experimental methodologies were. Here's his basic argument. He essentially is saying that he has unlimited resources and unlimited wisdom so that he is the perfect character, the perfect individual to do the research on all the pleasures of life and see their ultimate end.

[ 9 : 12 ] He's not limited by imagination, by capacity. If he wants to do something, he can. If he wants to explore an avenue of pleasures, he can explore it fully.

He won't run out of resources. And it's key. He's able to do it without getting fully sucked into the hype about that relative, that particular thing.

Nothing sadder than seeing a guy my age, childless, driving like a fancy car saying, no, this is exactly how I wanted my life to turn out. It's like, no, that no one.

That's not true. That's not true. That's not what you want. So having wisdom, not getting sucked into the hype of each one of these avenues of pleasure, he wants you to know that he did all of this exploration with a kind of stone-cold objectivity.

Look at verse 1 of chapter 2. I said in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. But behold, this was also vanity.

[ 10 : 14 ] I said of laughter, it is mad. And of pleasure, what use is it? I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine, my heart still guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

That's the experiment he's running. He's trying to figure out what is good for man and woman to do with their short time on this earth. And he never gets hijacked by the hype.

He's never surrendered into the sunk cost fallacy that so many of us tend to use to justify our choices, even though it's obvious they weren't ideal.

He says in verse 4, I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.

I brought male and female slaves and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.

[ 11 : 21 ] I also had gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also, my wisdom remained with me and whatever my eye desired, it did not keep from them.

I kept my heart from no pleasure for my heart found pleasure in all my toil. And this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil that I had expended in doing it.

And behold, all was vanity and striving after wind. And there was nothing to be gained under the sun. So here's the idea. He's run the experiment thoroughly.

You do not need to go down any of the avenues. This is what he wants you to understand. Charlie Munger once said that one of the best strategies for being, being unhappy is to insist on learning every lesson for yourself through firsthand experience, not learning to take anybody's word for it.

[ 12 : 27 ] But here the author of Ecclesiastes is saying, guys, I literally tried everything. I ran the full course of every possible pleasure available.

And now you should listen to my report. And his report is, is that all of it evaporates before you've even had a chance to fully enjoy it.

That's life under the sun. That's what the preacher has to say in a negative sense. Happy Father's Day. I think the thing that people don't realize is, is that the book of Ecclesiastes is actually the spine of it.

The structure of it is actually seven, almost exactly the similar statements that are positive. I think this is the great time to introduce this book on Father's Day, because in reality, if there was one message I would love to give to fathers still in the active ages of fathering, I would say this.

Let each day be its own reward. Don't get caught up in all of the future worries. Don't overwork.

[ 13 : 40 ] Don't underwork. Don't overwork. Don't overwork. Enjoy an average, wholesome life that never makes it onto Instagram or YouTube or anywhere else.

I think in many respects, Ecclesiastes is the anti-coveting book, and it's the pro-wholesome, simple things that the world would laugh at.

Make that your central joy, your central thing. Seven times he says that each time after exploring some particular pleasure or another.

Look at chapter 2, verse 24. There is nothing better for a person than he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

This also I saw is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment. Ecclesiastes 3.12, I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live.

[ 14 : 52 ] Also, that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. This is God's gift to man. Again, in chapter 3, verse 22.

So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

Chapter 5, verse 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 for he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

I wouldn't say I've had an especially easy life. I wouldn't say I've had an especially hard life. But I will say I've had so many days that I can't remember that were simply simple, quiet days of joy.

[ 16 : 08 ] As a dad of three kids, undertaking all of the responsibilities the Lord put on my shoulders at various times. Honestly, if you're here and you're my age, you're at this stage of life, you could stand up right now and tell all these young dads that day after day, work, go home, sit at the table, eat your food, have a quiet evening, have some folks over, whatever.

That's it, man. That's the worldview. That's the positive worldview of Ecclesiastes. A wholesome, simple life. Now, think about it.

How many products does a person living a wholesome, simple life buy? Versus how many products does a person who is concerned about being all they can be and following all their dreams buy? One of my big jobs as your preacher is to keep pushing against all of these people who are motivated by their own greed to get you to want more and more and more and fall into the trap of perpetual consumption so that you never have any kind of contentment, you never have any kind of sweetness about your life that says, this is fine, this is wonderful, this is more than I deserve, I'm so grateful for this.

That's the worldview that is presented in Ecclesiastes, a world that stops asking, what's next, and starts saying, this is really nice.

[ 17 : 53 ] That's an incredible gift. A number of the Puritans that wrote on the gift of contentment would all say, if you can get this, you really have everything.

Ecclesiastes 8, 15, Ecclesiastes 9, 7, Go eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

Let your garments always be white, let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom and shoal to which you are going. I will just tell you personally, men, I would not be married if I took myself as seriously as the world wanted me to take myself.

Does that make sense? I had to at some point just say, I'm just a dude who wants to kiss a girl and make some babies and eat chicken.

[ 19 : 31 ] One of the things that you've got to watch out for is this trap of exceptionalism. I'm all for excellence. The text actually says, whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might.

But the difference between excellence and exceptionalism is that exceptionalism is a thing people do to you to get you to manipulate you in certain directions.

Who is telling you, you know what? You're a creature. You've got a short lifespan. You're exceedingly fragile. Like one thing could happen and you just don't exist anymore.

Like what you should probably do is just get down to the business of having sweet table fellowship with other human beings and putting your head at the pillow every night with a smile on your face because the God of the universe loves you.

There's a million things I could have become. There's a million things you could have become. I am here right now telling you what I have become was simply the product of day in, day after, simple, wholesome enjoyment.

[ 20 : 45 ] And the worst versions of myself and the worst versions of my fatherhood and the worst versions of my husbanding were when that wasn't enough. Ecclesiastes 11, 9 through 10.

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes, but know for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

Remove vexation from your heart and put away pain from your body for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. Picture the puddle of a young family and you have to understand that will go away. You will not have that. Drink of the puddle today. Drink of the water today. It will evaporate by tonight. Your youth. Enjoy it.

It's not lasting. It's going away. Whatever goodness, like wholesome, true goodness God has placed in your life, make the most of it.

[ 21 : 53 ] And one of the things we can see about these seven benchmarks is that he gets more insistent as he continues through the experiment. He starts with like, well, there's nothing better.

You know, this is it. It's almost like, guys, I'm sorry, but this is the best we can do. But as he progresses, he says, I commend joy to you.

Go eat your bread. Rejoice, oh young man. The longer he runs the experiment, the more confident he is that that simple, wholesome approach to life is the best you can do.

That is absolutely what any wise guy my age or older would tell every young man in this room. This is the best you can do, man.

Like, and by the way, I'll talk about mission in a minute. This doesn't exclude mission whatsoever. In fact, my home life, my marriage has been the basis for my mission.

[ 22 : 56 ] Okay. Now, what is going on here is kind of eerily similar to Epicureanism. How many of you know about Epicureanism? There's a caricature version of it, and then there's the actual thing.

Epicureanism is not, a man in a toga face down in a bowl of grapes, gluttony and indulgence and the all-you-can-eat buffet. That's not it.

Epicureanism is founded by Epicurus, Greek philosopher, and yes, he taught that pleasure is the highest good, but what he meant by pleasure was not a wild night out.

He meant the simple act of being with friends with simple food and time on your hands. Now, Epicureanism is not what is being prescribed here for one main reason.

Epicurus's approach to giving people joy in the moment, helping people live in the moment, was to kill the fear of God and the fear of death. Epicurus would say, yes, there is a God or the gods exist.

[ 24 : 03 ] They have no relevance in your life. They don't really care what you do, and so just do what you want. It'll be fine. And, of course, the fear of death for them, for Epicurus, was simple.

You are alive now. You will one day not be alive. It won't matter. So, Epicureanism seeks this sort of sweet peace in life by getting rid of the God of the Bible and getting rid of the afterlife as you and I know it.

So, Epicureanism isn't the solution, but there's something about it that is true enough to wind up being totally aligned with what the preacher is saying.

Epicurus got his peace. He would prescribe peace by subtraction. He takes God out of the frame, judgment off the table, and the reason that you're allowed to relax and enjoy your bread is that nobody's watching and nothing's coming.

The gift has no giver. The life has no audit. Just do what you want. But the preacher does the exact opposite. He goes back and he says, this is all from God.

[ 25 : 08 ] That's why it's good, and that's why you should enjoy it, and that's also why you should watch what you do with your life because judgment is coming and you will stand before God. But in reality, he's saying something very similar to Epicureus in that you should chill, Daddy, and just enjoy enjoy the moment.

Let the moment be the opportunity you use to worship God, appreciate what he's done, and so forth.

Now, fathers, I want to specifically charge you with being the pace setter of joy and enthusiasm over the little things.

in your family. I want you to be the leader who is the most enthusiastic about the little things, the little, sweet, undeserved pleasures.

I want you to be the enthusiastic bedrock of contentment, happiness in the Lord and what he has done. Get rid of all the striving and all the worrying and all the comparison and all the coveting and be the guy who is present and happy that we're having corn tonight.

[ 26 : 30 ] I like corn. Kids, don't you like corn? Kids, look at the beautiful clouds today. Oh my goodness, look at those clouds. What does that cloud look like to you? Be that guy.

Be the guy who is present and who is enjoying the life that God has put before you. Now, you might say, okay, but what about dying to self?

What about taking up your cross? And all these kinds of things. Well, first of all, the absolute number one way, I know most of you guys really well, the absolute number one way you need to die to yourself is you need to stop taking yourself so dang seriously.

You know what the series Ecclesiastes, I kind of want to call it, I want to call it Ecclesiastes, leave the overthinking to the professionals. That's what he's done for you.

That's what he's done for you. He did all the overthinking for you. So you could be done with that.

You can just drink your Kool-Aid. Have your dinner.

[ 27 : 38 ] In a very real sense, the number one way we die to ourselves is we stop taking ourselves so seriously. We let the God of the universe be the God of the universe.

We let Jesus be the hero. And we're just people. The reality is there's nothing at all incongruent about enjoying a simple, wholesome life, which by the way, Paul prescribes in a number of places in his letters, including 1 Thessalonians 4.11, where he says, I want everybody to live a quiet, peaceful life, work with their hands.

Simple, wholesome goodness. Of course, to do that, you've got to put these blinders on and stop paying attention to everything else that everybody else has.

You've got to get out of the mimetic loop, as Rene Girard would talk about. And the reality is that getting out of that mimetic loop and actually just being a man who enjoys a wholesome, simple life is totally consistent with mission itself.

After all, Acts 2.46, which we read two weeks ago, and day by day attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they receive their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people, and the Lord added to their number day by day those who are being saved.

[ 29 : 05 ] saved. So guys, I want to give you an aim. I want you to try to do this. I want you to go to bed every single day as much as you can with a smile on your face.

tomorrow will be there when you wake up. You did your work. You loved your people.

You confessed your sins. You found forgiveness. You found pleasure in lawful expressions, the ones that God says are good, not the ones he says are bad.

and you can put your head on the pillow with a sweet little smile on your face that will spread over your family and to your wife and you will be saying, boy, this is enough, isn't it?

Boy, God has just been so good to us. Make it your aim to go to bed every day with a smile on your face because you did what you were called to do.

[ 30 : 03 ] You loved who you were called to love. You confessed your sins. You found grace, so on and so forth. I believe that many men in this room are limited in their ability to enjoy the simple good life because they do not know for sure that they are right with their maker.

Look at Ecclesiastes. Chapter 2, verse 26. For to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.

But to the sinner, he has given the business of gathering and collecting only to give to the one who pleases God. Guys, is God pleased with you?

Is God pleased with you? Friends, I'll tell you how to go to bed every night with a smile on your face. When someone asks you, is God pleased with you? Your instinct should be to say, he is pleased with Jesus Christ. And I stand in him.

[ 31 : 28 ] Through no merit of my own, I found Jesus. The one whom the Father said insistently, this is my son in whom I am well pleased.

Brothers, do you have gospel rest in your soul? Do you know that you know that you know that the God of the universe is pleased with you because you have placed yourself, he has placed you in Jesus Christ?

My guess is, is that that is a doctrine, but not a pillow for some of you in this room. It's a truth, but not one you rest your head on every day.

But boy, I'll tell you what, you get that right, you become convinced that through no merit of your own, the God of the universe sent his son to redeem you and pay for your sins so that you could be his child and be right with him.

You get that right, then you can rest. You don't get that right, you never can rest. So, brothers, yes, I know pretty much everybody here would be able to articulate the gospel.

[ 32 : 50 ] Is this your gospel? Is this your good news? Is it calming and quieting your soul? Is it cheering your face?

Is it giving you the ability to live in the moment as the preacher of Ecclesiastes is commending? Or, do you always have to be proven yourself?

Always have to posture, always have to do your thing to differentiate, to earn respect, to earn a place? Well, you're not going to rest like that.

But when you, when the Holy Spirit gives you that sense of, I'm just a dude who got forgiven and the glorious righteousness of Christ is my all, then you can engage in this positive lifestyle that the author of Ecclesiastes is commending.

you can sit down and say, done enough today. Praise God for a little meal with friends, a little calm, a little sleep.

[ 34 : 01 ] We'll get up tomorrow and do the same thing again. Brothers, that's my wish for you this Father's Day, that gospel peace would absolutely become your pillow, would absolutely become your rest.

and that you would be able to, in these crucial moments that you'll never get back, look at it and say, this is more than enough. Thank you, Lord. I am enjoying this in you.

Going to communion, what does it tell you about God when he says, I need a way to get my people to experience my presence and remember what I've done for them?

And he says, a meal. Doesn't that line up exactly with what the writer of Ecclesiastes is saying?

Doesn't it? See, what God is doing even with this table is he is inviting each and every one of you into gospel rest, letting go of your striving, letting go of taking yourself so seriously and embracing the fact that you are not God.

But the God who is God has shed his precious blood to remove your sins. So if you're a follower of Jesus Christ today, whether you're visiting this church or a member, would you come in a moment after I pray, take these elements, return to your seat, and we'll partake of them together.

[ 35 : 20 ] Father God, we pray for gospel rest over each and every person in this room. May they know that they know that they know that they are secure in Jesus Christ, whom you love and with whom you are well pleased.

Help us partake in this time of communion with faith and the one whom we have run into refuge, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We pray these things in his name.

Amen. Come.