



Chasing the Wind - The Book of Ecclesiastes

By Reid S. Monaghan

Introduction

Human life and consciousness is indeed a peculiar thing. None of us asks to be born, and truth be told, none of us has much control over the end of our lives. Yet we grow up thinking we can become masters of our own destinies. People have always oscillated between an overconfident mindset of mastery of their lives and a pessimistic cynicism that the world is against us and there is little we can do about it. When we start to think a bit about our existence, life can appear quite puzzling and mysterious.

One thing is certain: life is a journey from cradle to grave with lots of questions along the way. Some of us try to stay amused to the point where we just laugh our way through life never really confronting its many pains and frustrations. Such attempts turn out to be in vain. Others are daily aware of injustice, oppression and the cruel realities of our world. Whether young or old this is a point when we must ask what life is really about. Is it a journey with God going somewhere or an empty straining through nothingness really going nowhere? As we travel through our brief time on the earth there are many things that perplex and disturb us. As we seek to find happiness in the midst of a world that is quite broken, many enter the hard chase for success, wealth, education and significance. As we attempt to control life and make everything turn out just the way we want, we end up frustrated with numerous questions about life, justice and God. Ecclesiastes is a meditation upon such vexation and questioning.

This ancient book is a reflection on life from a person who had it all, had done it all and questioned it all during his journey through life. He had more money than Bill Gates and more girls gone wild to fulfill all the lusts of his youth. He had more power than anyone in his culture and accomplished great things during an illustrious career. To put it in our terms, he was "successful" in every way. What were his concluding thoughts about life?

I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity, a chasing after the wind... Ecclesiastes 1:14

With such a beginning, some might think this would lead Ecclesiastes to be a moribund buzz-kill of cynical writing. They would be wrong. If we hang around with the preacher of Ecclesiastes a little

while, we will see that there is a real message of hope to be found in his reflections. Rather than pessimistic, this writing in fact points us towards true wisdom when life observed “under the sun” reveals itself to be void, empty and maddening. This fall at Jacob’s Well we will walk through the book of Ecclesiastes as we seek life, hope, meaning and faith in God. In Ecclesiastes we will find that there is a different life possible with God at its center. It is through faith that we are taken towards living and seeing all things as more than mere vanity. It is through faith in Jesus that we come to see life from a perspective that is eternal and “beyond the sun.”

In this essay I have some ambitious goals. First, I want to briefly introduce you to this book, which we will spend a great deal of time studying together. Second, we will look at some important background issues that will help us understand this work. Finally, we will close with a look at some of its major themes along with some reasons Ecclesiastes is a timely word for us in twenty-first century western culture. So, without further ado, let me introduce you to my little friend...the book of Ecclesiastes.

The Book of Ecclesiastes

The book of the Ecclesiastes has both puzzled and thrilled its readers over the millennia with its honest rants about the vanity of everything. Ecclesiastes is known for keeping it real, perhaps too real for some. Some have taken the book to be a pessimistic writing poking at the biblical teaching about life and God with an editor tacking on a smiley face at the end of it.¹ Others have wondered how a book where God simply does not speak could be considered Scripture, the very words of God.² One thing is certain: the book of Ecclesiastes has drawn in the skeptic and the faithful over the centuries and even captured the attention of an influential 1960s rock band.³

The honesty of the writing caused the renowned agnostic author Herman Melville to call it the “truest of all books” in his novel *Moby Dick*.⁴ Further, Thomas Wolfe in the classic novel *You Can’t Go Home Again* wrote that “Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known, and the wisdom expressed in it the most lasting and profound.”⁵ The German monk and reformer Martin Luther apparently encouraged that “this noble little book” should be read every day because it firmly rejected a sentimental religiosity⁶. The book has frustrated many of the faithful as the writing seems to contradict much of the Bible’s other teachings and even seems to contradict itself in its own teaching. Old Testament Scholar Tremper Longman III said it this way:

“Close study shows that Qohelet’s thought rambles, repeats and occasionally contradicts itself. Such lack of order, though, far from detracting from the message of the book, actually contributes to it.”⁷

The message of the book is calling us to look with stark reality at the world around us and its chaotic gyrations throughout history. It is not an easy book to read nor will its overall message be positively

¹ See brief treatment in Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*, Foundations for Expository Sermons (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 8.

² Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 22, 23.

³ Some may be familiar with the song “Turn, Turn, Turn” by the Byrds which was a chart-topping hit in 1965.

⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes - Why Everything Matters*, ed. R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 14.

⁵ Kreeft, 16.

⁶ Greidanus, 2. See footnote 5.

⁷ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Nicot) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 22.

received by all. Yet for all who are willing to look this writing in the eyes (or rather have it look back and examine the foundations of our own lives), it is one of the most powerful pointers to the true purpose and meaning of existence.

The title of the book derives from its first verse “The words of the *Preacher*, son of David, King in Jerusalem.” The English word translated Preacher here is the Hebrew term *Qohelet*. The Greek translation of which is *Ekklesiastes* and *Ecclesiastes* in Latin. The name literally means “one who assembles” or “speaks to an assembly.” What follows is a brief treatment of the authorship, structure and literary function of Ecclesiastes along with a look at the literary forms present in the work. We’ll take each of these in turn.

Authorship

The book of Ecclesiastes is technically an anonymous writing in that the text does not tell us precisely who wrote it. It simply claims to be the words of “the preacher” or “teacher” as mentioned above. However, in the tradition of both Jews and Christians, there is a long and strong attestation of authorship to the person of Solomon, son of David, King in Jerusalem.⁸ In what follows I want to give you but a brief sketch of the arguments both for and against Solomon writing the work.

Arguments for Solomon

The arguments for Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes are clear and straightforward and proceed along two lines. The first is an argument from tradition and the second flows from the actual words of the book. We’ll cover the tradition and then the internal evidence from Ecclesiastes.

Solomon’s authorship of the book has a long tradition in the covenant community. Both Jews and Christians have long held that the ancient son of David was the author of Ecclesiastes. The earliest recorded writings about the book declare Solomon the writer. Gregory Thaumaturgos paraphrased the book and chose the following for the first verse of the book: “Solomon (the son of the king and prophet David), a king more honoured and a prophet wiser than anyone else, speaks to the whole assembly of God”.⁹ Furthermore, Jewish commentary (targum) on Ecclesiastes clearly holds the author to be Solomon, and the book is in fact a testimony for his return to the faith after his earlier apostasy recorded in the biblical book of 1 Kings.¹⁰ The tradition of Ecclesiastes being the work of an elderly King Solomon is both long and strong and still maintained by some conservative Old Testament scholars today.¹¹ In addition to the attestation of history there is strong internal evidence in the writing to attribute Solomon as its author.

The first and most glaring is the prescription found in the first verse: “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Solomon, who was David’s son and successor, does seem to fit this simple description. Second, the description found in chapter 2 of a ruler with great wealth, wisdom and power also seems to fit well with an autobiographical description of Solomon. The preacher of Ecclesiastes is also said to be a person of great wisdom and a speaker of proverbs. All of this is in

⁸ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. E. RAY CLENDENEN, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 254.

⁹ Longman, 2,3. See also <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/stg40003.htm> for another translation of Gregory’s paraphrase in its entirety.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ Notably are Duane A. Garrett. and Walter C. Kaiser *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (1979)

concord with the picture we get of Solomon in the book of 1 Kings.¹² Finally, Solomon is seen to be one who assembled and spoke to the people of Israel at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8. Some see this as a textual connection and identification of Solomon, as he was indeed the teacher for the assembly in the earlier days of his rule.¹³

Arguments against Solomonic Authorship

More recently, a scholarly consensus has developed against Solomon being the actual author of the work. Some reject his connection with the work outright while others clearly see the imagery and life of Solomon used in the early parts of the work. The arguments proceed along various lines. First, the book does not claim to be the work of Solomon but only an anonymous “preacher” or “assembler.” Second, the clear imagery associated with the life of Solomon ends after chapter 2 and the preacher does not return to it. Third, the book actually has the preacher referred to in third person in both chapter one and chapter twelve so there seems to be a narrator who quotes the teaching of the preacher found in 1:12-12:7. The narrator could indeed be quoting Solomon, but this is used to eliminate the idea that Solomon wrote the entire book. Fourth, the wisdom offered late in the book speaks negatively against the oppression of kings which some find odd coming from a king.¹⁴ It may be that Solomon is speaking as a philosopher, thus would not be unusual for him to speak against the oppression of Kings so common in the ancient world. Finally, there are many arguments made that the language of the book shows a time frame later than that of Solomon so he must not be its author, though such linguistic arguments seem far from conclusive.¹⁵



What Matters

While some find a slam-dunk case for or against Solomon as author, he is certainly in view, and this is the most natural reading of the book. Phillip Graham Ryken summarizes this sentiment well:

Judging by what the book says, Ecclesiastes may well have been written by Solomon himself; this is the most natural way to read the Biblical text. But even if another author used Solomon to help make his point the words of Ecclesiastes are the very words of God inspired by the Holy Spirit. The end of the book tells us that whatever wisdom we find in the book has been given by “one shepherd” (Ecclesiastes 12:11), meaning God himself. Furthermore, Solomon’s life is clearly presented as a biblical context for what we read in Ecclesiastes. The book’s real life background – and we need to see it from this perspective – is the story we read about Solomon in 1 Kings and other places.¹⁶

Either Solomon is speaking directly about his life experience or the writer simply known as Qohelet is clearly using his biography as a teaching device for us. Solomon’s life is in view and the text should be understood this way. In light of this, and what I find to be the inconclusive nature of the arguments against Solomon being the source of Qohelet’s wisdom, I will use Solomon’s life as the backdrop in our study of the book. The structure of the book of Ecclesiastes makes it clear to us that the words of the

¹² Longman, 2.

¹³ Ryken, 18.

¹⁴ Some of the arguments given in opposition to the traditional view can be found in Longman, 4-9.

¹⁵ Ibid., 11-15.

¹⁶ Ryken, 18.

preacher are to be heard as a recounting of Solomon's fall and apostasy and the wisdom we glean from him as he looks back upon life as older man. A pastor is wise to teach it as such.¹⁷

Structure, Purpose and Message of Ecclesiastes

Structure

The structure of the book contains a short introductory narration in chapter one followed by a long speech/sermon from the preacher, which makes up the bulk of the book. The sermon is filled with an autobiographical reflection on the world and what the preacher has observed during his years on earth. The book concludes with an epilogue from the narrator, which begins mid-way through chapter twelve. Though some make an argument that the narrator contradicts the arguments made by the preacher in the sermon in 1:12-12:7, we reject this idea and find great unity in the whole of the book. Iain Provan sums up that it is not "generally plausible that Qohelet's voluminous words would be cited in full just so that the author of 12:8-12 could append a few comments allegedly doubting and criticizing them (and even then not managing to do so clearly)."¹⁸ Duane Garrett concludes that the narrator, the voice of wisdom that speaks in the book and that of the preacher are all the unified voice of the same author.¹⁹

As we get into the book we see that the preacher's sermon is divided in two main parts. The first consists of Ecclesiastes 1:12-6:9 and the second from 6:10-11:6. In the first section he focuses on the question of what is good for people to do "under the sun" with his reflections ending with "all is vanity, a striving after wind." This phrase is not found in Ecclesiastes after chapter 6. In the second half of the sermon he focuses on how we do not know what is ultimately good nor do we know the future. In the first half, all is seen as vanity in the face of the great equalizer of death. In the second part, human control is frustrated by our inability to know what will come down the road in the future. It seems questions framed by our mortality and our finite knowledge are clearly structuring the sermon.²⁰

Overall Purpose

The book is a work in deconstruction in that its aim and purpose is to tear down the idea that life has an abiding significance apart from God and his purposes for it. It is also full of hope and encouragement. There is great joy in life when everything is seen in light of a relationship with God and enjoying his gifts to humanity. Some authors seem to want to make Ecclesiastes only a work of pessimism or only a work of joy, but I see both as clearly present.

Though it is not a linear argument like many in western culture are accustomed to, its overall flow and structure does spiral towards an end with the deconstructive and constructive elements flowing forward together. The preacher meanders along taking apart various aspects of life "under the sun" and cyclically revisits them throughout his discussion. Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft even went as far to draw up a syllogism of the deconstructing aspect of book's argument:

¹⁷ See introductions in the works of two pastors: Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether - the Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999). and Tommy Nelson, *A Life Well Lived - a Study of the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005).

¹⁸ Quoted in Greidanus, 8,9.

¹⁹ In his introduction Garrett argues that Solomonic authorship is very likely. Either way, his argument ultimately is in favor of one unified purpose between the narrator and the long sermon of Ecclesiastes. See introduction in Garrett, 254 and onward.

²⁰ This paragraph follows Greidanus who is summarizing the work of Addison Wright, Greidanus, 19.

1. All “toil” is “under the sun”
2. All “under the sun” is “vanity”
3. Therefore all “toil” is “vanity”

We will cover what some of these very important words and phrases in quotations mean in Ecclesiastes in a moment. For now I just want you to see the progression of thought the preacher will take us through.²¹ Kreeft does not say Ecclesiastes is a work in structured syllogistic logic; of course it is not. He is simply saying that like all human arguments, it can be represented in this concise, summary form.²² Kreeft takes the long sermon in 1:12-12:7 to be almost completely negative and without true and hopeful insights from God. While I do not fully agree and do find some rays of hope along the way, he is nonetheless accurate in understanding the preacher’s main argument deconstructing life under the sun. Solomon aims to beat us down but not to leave us hopeless in the end.

Summarizing the Message

Though we will cover more in detail below, I want to comment briefly on the overall message of the entire book as conveyed by the preacher and the narrator. Many have put forth good effort to summarize the whole message of Ecclesiastes in concise form. Michael Eaton has a delightful paragraph, which I found a helpful wrap-up of the overall message of the book:

The fear of God which he recommends (3:14; 5:7; 8:12; 12:13) is not only the beginning of wisdom [as taught in the book of Proverbs]; it is also the beginning of joy, of contentment and of an energetic and purposeful life. The Preacher wishes to deliver us from a rosy-coloured, self-confident godless life, with its inevitable cynicism and bitterness, and from trusting in wisdom, pleasure, wealth and human justice or integrity. He wishes to drive us to see that God is there, that he is good and generous, and that only such an outlook makes life coherent and fulfilling.²³

Ecclesiastes wants to break our fragile, weak, self-created happiness and call us to a greater and eternal happiness with God. As such we need the wisdom of this book to break through our illusions of living forever and of ourselves being the measure of all things. So in this book there is a time for tearing down things and a time for building them back up. The brief and forgettable moment of our lives show us that all apart from eternity is vanity. Our inability to control all things teaches us that we are not God. Though your public school teacher or self-esteem guru may have told you that you are full of awesome, the Preacher does not wear such kid gloves to teach. He wants to get to the bottom of our emptiness in order to fill us up again. At the end of it, we will either worship or curse God as a result of such strong medicine; we’ll either become one who places faith in God or remain a rebel worshipping created things. This much is clear: there is no room to wiggle after all has been heard from the Preacher.

Literary Genre(s) found in Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is found among the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and as such should be interpreted in this genre. The biblical wisdom literature is a body of unique writings in that they

²¹ Kreeft, 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 24. Kreeft goes to great lengths to say this “Though the author has never read Aristotle or any logic textbook and did not consciously intend his book to take the form of a syllogism, nevertheless it *is* as syllogism, simply because that is the form in which the human mind naturally and instinctively argues emphasis in the original.

²³ Quoted in Greidanus, 22.

instruct God's covenant people (those who have entered relationship with him through his gracious promises and work in Jesus the Messiah) in how they are to walk with him on the earth. Living in wisdom is living in godliness reflecting the nature of the kingdom of God in the course of everyday living. The canonical books of Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Proverbs, some of the Psalms, the writings of James and portions of the teachings of Jesus are rightly seen as writings offering wisdom for God's people.

As wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes offers a philosophical reflection on meaning, happiness and the transient nature of life on the earth. It is perhaps the most purely philosophical writing in our Scriptures. Ecclesiastes as a whole is made up of several types or sub-genres of writing. Sidney Greidanus enumerates them as follows:²⁴

- *Reflection* – We quite literally get to listen to the preacher reflect to himself about life. It is quite a ride as Solomon is quite the verbal processor. Some of you will likely relate.
- *Proverb* – A proverb is a short statement about a general principle or truth stated in a memorable form. Much care has to be taken in interpreting proverbs and those found in Ecclesiastes are no exception.
- *Direct Instruction* – Teach, teacher! Teaching something clearly and directly so that others can know and understand.
- *Autobiographical Narrative* – There is much in Ecclesiastes where the preacher tells his own life story and draws conclusions.
- *Anecdote* – an anecdote is a short memorable story.
- *Metaphor* – saying something is something else in order to teach by way of analogy.
- *Allegory* – metaphor in more extended, story-like form. The teaching about a house at the end of the book uses many metaphors that form an allegory about old age.

In my essay "A Brief Introduction to Wisdom Literature and the Book of Proverbs" I cover some helpful principles in interpreting wisdom literature in general and proverbs in particular.²⁵ For our purposes here, there are some helpful keys we need to look at for properly understanding Ecclesiastes.

Keys to Understanding

There are several things I want all of us to keep in mind as we study Ecclesiastes. The first is the nature of the preacher's sermon; it is not simple straightforward teaching like a letter in the New Testament. Second, there are some important words or phrases upon which our understanding of the message of Ecclesiastes hinges. We'll cover each of these in turn.

A Life Struggle Out Loud

Teaching can be accomplished in multiple ways, styles and modes of communication. A teacher can use direct instruction explaining very openly what she is trying to convey. Another way of teaching is

²⁴ Ibid., 12-15. The brief summaries of his categories are my own.

²⁵ My essay "A Brief Introduction to Wisdom Literature and the Book of Proverbs" is available online here: <http://www.powerofchange.org/blog/2010/1/4/a-brief-introduction-to-wisdom-literature-and-the-book-of-pr.html>

through what the ancient Greeks called the *elenchus*, a way of questioning and dialogue in order to come to a conclusion. There are also indirect ways of teaching where the message is grasped by seeing the connections in a story or the implications of a line of reasoning. Usually, when someone is taught indirectly they end up saying “ooh, I see what they are getting at” or “oh, I’m feeling you.”

Ecclesiastes includes much reflection and autobiography. We are learning indirectly by listening to the preacher process life out loud. As such, his message becomes louder and clearer as it proceeds to its crystal clear conclusion in chapter 12. As an indirect teaching, much of what he says “along the way” may or may not be true in an ultimate sense, but shows us the processing of his observations.

Much has been said about the way the preacher in Ecclesiastes seems to contradict himself. In one place he extols the value of wisdom, and then later he dismisses it as without lasting value. In another place he sees the good in work yet he also dismisses it as vanity. One thing wisdom literature makes us do, and Qohelet’s words certainly do, is think about the sense in which he means something. We should constantly be asking “what this means” in light of the whole of the book and in light of the teaching of the rest of the Bible and in light of what the preacher is trying to do with these particular words. Reading the book in a strict way without any distinctions in the sense of meaning would miss many of his points and bring confusion. Believers have sometimes failed in understanding this as they come away from reading Ecclesiastes with the thought “he is speaking as if he doesn’t even believe in the goodness of God, why is this in the Bible!?!?” What they fail to see is that he is doing just that, he is showing us where such a negative view ends up. He is speaking only of observations “under the sun” as if a sure word from God was left out. This of course ends up in vanity.

Understanding Key Words and Phrases

More than anything else we need to grapple with a few words and phrases in Ecclesiastes or we can get tangled and lost in the Preacher’s discourse. The following are important as we seek to interpret and learn from the book.

What the Hebel?

One of the words that strike us right away in chapter 1 is the word “vanity” (ESV) or “meaningless” (NIV). It is shocking to read the first few verses and have some guy ranting about the emptiness of everything. Most people would choose reality TV over such buzz-killing realities. The word used here is the Hebrew term *hebel*, and a rather mysterious term it is. It is used some thirty-five times in the book and it literally means “vapor” or “puff of air” and is used in various ways in the Scriptures depending upon context. Pastor Mark Dever summarizes the use of the word here by saying that whatever is called *hebel* “can be easily, quickly and permanently whisked away, like smoke, a cloud, or a desert mirage, leaving behind no remainder.”²⁶ It is a similar idea to that which is conveyed in the New Testament book of James where we read: “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:14 ESV). In the Old Testament there are three main ways in which the word *hebel* is used. In addition to its usage here in Ecclesiastes, it also describes the worship of false

²⁶ Mark Dever, *Promises Made - the Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 529.

and worthless things and thus can be translated “idols.” It also is used to speak of the brevity of certain works or efforts (see Isaiah 49:6; Job 7:16).²⁷

The Preacher wants us to hear that everything, and believe me he means everything, is just this: a vain, empty, futile chase without meaning, what he calls a “striving after wind.”

The Wind Chaser

The phrase *chasing after the wind* is coupled with the word *hebel* in Ecclesiastes as a wonderful word picture and poetic device. Our lives are spent in the chase for meaning and futile endeavors “under the sun.” We’ll cover this other crucial phrase next, but here we need to see that all we do, if done as an end for itself, is like running around trying to catch the wind. It is like trying to control and shepherd²⁸ the uncontrollable, a fool’s errand on the earth. What is vanity and chasing the wind? Well, everything, if the assumption is that all life is comprised of but a few short years before we become worm food. All our toys, accomplishments, bank accounts, fame and glory will vanish and there will be no remembrance of you a few generations from now.

In commenting on this phrase “chasing after the wind” Peter Kreeft likens life “under the sun” as a wild goose chase, only one that has no wild goose.²⁹ Bummer. Ecclesiastes does not seek to rescue us from our despair before feeling it. Unless we can feel him on this, the preacher does not relent; he wants us to see through the illusions of money, power and human posturing “under the sun” so that we might lift our heads beyond it. To this very important phrase we now turn.

Toiling Under the Sun

The Preacher’s observations of life take place somewhere; they take place in this world. They are not reflections on heaven or life as it ought to be, but only as seen by human eyes without the aid of faith. Now I do think his reflections do contain truth and wisdom; some of his statements would even be “true” if indeed there was no God. So the preacher oscillates back and forth between his reflections on life “under the sun” with scattered reflections about God. Kreeft summarizes the “under the sun” reflections well:

Unlike all other books in the Bible, it has no faith flashbulb attached to its camera to reveal the inner depths or hidden meanings of life. It uses only the available light “under the sun”: sense observation and human reason. The surface of life appears in this book with total clarity, brutal honesty, and spiritual poverty...[Ecclesiastes is] the question to which the rest of the Bible is the answer.³⁰

This illustration might be helpful. Imagine that you came to a get-together with some friends and someone hands you a bottle and tells you this is the best imported beer (or wine, or soda if you are not 21 or you abstain, or whatever) you will ever taste. You have expectations rising, you have hopes

²⁷ Robert Laird Harris R. Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 204.

²⁸ Peter J. Leithart prefers the translation “shepherding the wind” to focus on this aspect of humans thinking they can control and master all things.

²⁹ Kreeft, 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

of the coming enjoyment but you notice that it has a stubborn bottle cap and you simply cannot open the thing. You know there is some joy to be found, but it evades you. Life under the sun is like that – you have it right in your hands but cannot figure it out, so it becomes increasingly frustrating and empty. So you try everything you know to open that bottle. Either you will break it by trying to enjoy it or you'll perhaps realize that maybe someone has a bottle opener. So what the Preacher desires for us to know is that all of our toils under the sun end up in empty futility. It is like holding a treasure in your hand and not being able to enjoy it. This is of course the conclusion of many philosophers of the modern era with their discourses on the nauseous meaninglessness of life.³¹

One note must be said about the word “toil” before we move along. At first glance, we might think this only means a drudgery of manual hard labor. This is partially what Solomon means using this phrase, yet it is more comprehensive. Our “toils under the sun” are various human endeavors: working to learn, working a job, seeking pleasure, being entertained, various amusements, religious undertakings and taking and exercising power before we die. Toiling describes various human endeavors and many times these efforts distract us from the truth about life under the sun. Life, in purely rational observation, with no God, no eternity, and no reality apart from the day to day *is* “Vanity!” Yet perhaps we just need a bottle opener!

The Gift of God

There is another phrase in the sermon of Solomon that many who so rightly see the despair-under-the-sun message tend to overlook or discount. While the phrases of vanity, striving and toil are repeated, there is also another refrain lacing the sermon. Though its wording varies slightly, the basic message is “enjoy life...this is a gift from God.” It occurs in chapters 3, 5, 8, 9 and is like a strange glow in the midst of a dark room. While the parade of vanities travels the earth, God blesses his people with another point of view; one that we might say is from “beyond the sun.” When seen in their proper place, all of life’s simple pleasures—good drink with friends, the love of a spouse, the laughter amidst the toil and material resources—can be a gift from God. We can even enjoy life even amongst Vanity Fair³², if our eyes and hearts remain with God. Douglas Wilson places some wonderful insight around this idea:

For those who fear Him, He gives the gift of being able to actually enjoy this great big marching band of futility—the tubas of vanity bringing up the rear. God gives to a wise man the gift of watching, with a pious and grateful chuckle, one damn thing after another. All things considered, the furious activity of this world is about as meaningful as the half-time frenzy at the Super Bowl. But a wise man can be there and enjoy himself. *This* is the gift of God. The wise will notice how this point is hammered home throughout the book, again and again. Slowly it dawns on a man that this is really a book of profound...*optimism*. “I know of nothing better” (3:22); “Here is what I have seen; It is good and fitting” (5:18-19); “So I commended joy” (8:15); “Go and eat your bread with joy.”³³

³¹ The works of Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Thomas Beckett come to mind

³² Vanity Fair is a place through which Christian must travel on his way to the celestial city in John Bunyan’s classic work *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Vanity Fair is full of people focuses on the vanities of this life with no regard to the gospel. I recommend the Oxford World’s Classic Edition John Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford University Press, USA, 1678, 2003). There are also some fine audiobook versions as well.

³³ Wilson, 13.

When we look at life's pleasures we must ask whether these things are vanity or gift. Are they our destroyer or will they be friends? Well, it depends. If we make them our ultimate source of meaning they will bite us like a venomous snake leaving us in a pit of vanity. If we thank God for them as one that follows Him as our King, then they will find their proper place. Will we fear God or be idolaters making small pleasures into exalted divinities?³⁴ This is the question Ecclesiastes will leave us with.

Ecclesiastes for our Day

In our last trip around the book of Ecclesiastes together I want to shift to the question of the significance of this ancient writing for our day. Throughout time various books of the Bible speak with rapacious clarity to different peoples in varied times and places. For example, it is no coincidence that enslaved people have found great hope in the Exodus narrative throughout history and those suffering have been drawn to the book of Job and the life of Jesus in the gospels. It seems to me that Ecclesiastes is an important and providential book for our time.

In Western Culture we live in a historical moment in which material affluence, global influence and spiritual emptiness rule the day. In all of our affluence we seem to be wandering in a fog, unable to answer even the simplest questions about our existence. We have climbed to the top of Maslow's staircase³⁵ and are now working on our happiness through self-realization with utmost vigor. We are thankful to have Oprah as our great high priestess. Ironically we spend billions of dollars on two things in America: our unhappiness and our amusement. Our culture is chasing the wind and landing in therapy when joy does not come in the morning. We tell one another that we should be happy, pretty and that life should be a party. If something is not working then we must get someone to fix you; whatever fixing means and whatever state we imagine as being normal. We spend as much money on our mental health as we do on cancer in America, almost as much as fighting heart disease.³⁶ In light of our time and culture we will conclude with a discussion of a few themes of Ecclesiastes I find extremely relevant to our modern, western consumerist culture.

Themes for our Consideration

Life is Frustrating

There was a fun little anthem, a one-hit wonder of the 1980s, which has stayed with me since my teenage years. *Don't Worry, Be Happy* by Bobby McFerrin. Yet we sing it because we do worry and life does not always include happy notes. The song actually gives some good counsel (use Bing or Google and hit it up and try not to smile). Children of the 1990s may choose a similar anthem in *Hakuna Matta*—"no worries"—from Disney's *Lion King* fame. The counsel accompanying that song is not as good, though many young people today regularly attempt such a lifestyle. Ecclesiastes reminds

³⁴ For an excellent treatment of idolatry and the idols of our culture see Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods - the Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton 2009).

³⁵ For those unfamiliar, Abraham Maslow developed a view our human needs that is still in use today. It simply states that we move up a hierarchy in needs once we have certain things. Basic life needs (food, drink, shelter), then security needs (protection, law, order, stability), then community needs (belonging, family, being loved), then up to esteem needs (status, achievement, reputation) with "self-actualization at the top (existential fulfillment and personal growth)

³⁶ I am not saying that our mental health is unimportant and that good counselors and therapists cannot be of help to us. What I am saying is that happiness still proves quite elusive to the human race. Statistics from "The High Concentration of U.S. Health Care Expenditures," *Research in Action*, no. 19 (2006). <http://www.ahrq.gov/research/ria19/expendria.htm> (accessed September 16, 2010).

us that even when we have food, clothing and Apple products life is still frustrating; Murphy has his law for a reason.

We have greatly improved the quality of life on the earth through various advances in our sciences and technologies, but they have not fixed everything nor fixed the world. In fact, they have produced some unique ironies. During the 18th and 19th centuries western culture was dazzling itself with its own progress. By our reason, science, and mastery of the world we would end up creating heaven on earth. Over the last half-century or so that myth exploded.



Our technology was used to create weaponry that quite literally could destroy the world. Our mechanized society created oppressive work conditions in mills and factories worldwide driving groups of people with the whip of the "progress." The wonderful inventions of one era now fill people with panic and fear about coming environmental disasters.

So what do we do? What is left for us? We recycle our cans and crusade to undo that which came about through our own promised salvation. So we are again set to the task of using our own wisdom to save ourselves from the mess we made in another generation. Ecclesiastes points us to the reality that our problems are spiritual in nature and gives us the hope to work hard to alleviate suffering but to realize that we are but men and not gods.

We Struggle and We Question

In the 1960s a man named Ed Ames wrote a song entitled "Who Will Answer" that illustrated well the struggle of a generation. This generation lived at the closing of an age which some have called "modernism." The honesty of the song is striking indeed and I will quote a portion of it here.

From the canyons of the mind,
We wander on and stumble blindly
Through the often-tangled maze
Of starless nights and sunless days,
While asking for some kind of clue
Or road to lead us to the truth,
But who will answer?

Side by side two people stand,
Together vowing, hand-in-hand
That love's imbedded in their hearts,
But soon an empty feeling starts
To overwhelm their hollow lives,
And when they seek the hows and whys,
Who will answer?

On a strange and distant hill,
A young man's lying very still.
His arms will never hold his child,

Because a bullet running wild
Has struck him down. And now we cry,
"Dear God, Oh, why, oh, why?"
But who will answer?

High upon a lonely ledge,
a figure teeters near the edge,
And jeering crowds collect below
To egg him on with, "Go, man, go!"
But who will ask what led him
To his private day of doom,
And who will answer?

'Neath the spreading mushroom tree,
The world revolves in apathy
As overhead, a row of specks
Roars on, drowned out by discotheques,
And if a secret button's pressed
Because one man has been outguessed,
Who will answer?

Is our hope in walnut shells
Worn 'round the neck with temple bells,
Or deep within some cloistered walls
Where hooded figures pray in halls?
Or crumbled books on dusty shelves,
Or in our stars, or in ourselves,
Who will answer?

(Chorus)

If the soul is darkened
By a fear it cannot name,
If the mind is baffled
When the rules don't fit the game,
Who will answer? Who will answer? Who will answer?
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!, Hallelujah!³⁷

The modern era was about human control over all things. It led to great technologies but it also led to Auschwitz, Hiroshima and the empty questions seen in "Who Will Answer." Peter J. Leithart, in his book *Solomon Among the Postmoderns*, observes how the modern movement to "shepherd the wind" has not gone like we hoped it would. He uses the city of Detroit, with its 20th century assembly lines and mechanized manufacturing glory, as an illustration of the modern impulse towards control and mastery. As the modern project went bad in the 20th century, a century of devastating destruction and warfare, western society turned itself towards amusement. We dare not take up the hard

³⁷ Ed Ames, *Who Will Answer* (RCA Victor).

questions about truth and meaning, it would be better to simply throw a party. Whereas the modern era was reflected by Detroit, the current spirit of our age is reflected by Las Vegas. When control and domination does not work, we shift to pleasure and we'll party. We also tell ourselves that what happens in Vegas stays there and does not actually visit our souls.³⁸ We love such delusions and adventures in hiding the obvious.

Hiding the Elephant

In his essay on Ecclesiastes, philosopher Peter Kreeft describes the modern world having no answer to the biggest and most obvious question of all: What is it all there for? What are we here for? These questions, he tells us, are as big as an elephant, though it must be hidden from our eyes. He describes five ways in which the modern world tries to "hide the elephant." The discussion below mentions his first three.³⁹

The first attempt at elephant hiding is by diversion. As Neil Postman aptly put it, we work on *amusing ourselves to death*.⁴⁰ We consume information and we distract ourselves from dealing with ultimate questions. We stay busy under the sun so we do not have to look at the foreboding emptiness of our lives. Kreeft says this is the best way to hide an elephant; you bury it with mice.⁴¹ You just need a lot of them, and we have indeed created a great many tiny diversions in our time. Just watch the cats, squirrels and crazy people on YouTube! Or simply engage with some "reality" TV. I'm not saying these things cannot be a joy, but they are terrible at hiding elephants.

The second way we hide the elephant is by propaganda. We declare that anyone interested in such matters should keep it to themselves, or even better, that the question is not even a valid one. Whereas the diversion says, "shut up and take another drink," this one tells the honest seeker of truth simply to shut up. This is all in the name of open mindedness and tolerance of course.

Finally, there is indifference. We try and not care anymore about the big questions that have dominated human life and history. We are not concerned about questions of origin, meaning, morality and our destinies. We just want to get paid or laid. Evolution decrees it so. Yet then the emptiness, loneliness and pain of life keep calling for an answer and will not leave us alone. Some choose suicide; others choose to listen for the voice of their maker. Yet one thing is clear—there is no answer forthcoming from a tamed secularism where no one is free to run for fear they might step on someone's toes. There is no story coming from ourselves to explain our purpose, and there is pain surrounding Vegas.

Realities of Today

In the wake of a "believe nothing" secularism there is honesty that is coming to the forefront. It may come in the path of a new atheism embracing the realities of an atheistic worldview and desiring to argue away the religion of others. It may come in the form of Muslims who actually believe and practice Islam in the way of their prophet. But it is coming. When vanity and vapor visit us there are

³⁸ See discussion in Peter J. Leithart, *Solomon among the Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 55-58.

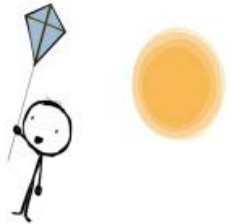
³⁹ Kreeft, 33.

⁴⁰ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985).

⁴¹ Kreeft, 33.

but two roads we can travel. One is where the book of Ecclesiastes ends: remember your creator, follow God and his ways. The second has many flavors but all are a chasing of the wind. Some chase the halls of power, politics and empire. After all, Alexander the Great, The Sultans of Istanbul, Napoleon and rationalist France, Hitler, Stalin and Mao all had intentions of fixing the world in their will to power. They all told us it was for our good that they conquered, so that they might save us. Some chase the halls of pleasure filling the bank accounts of the purveyors of pornography and the playboys of our day. The late English journalist Malcom Muggeridge anticipated all of this unfolding in our culture when he pointedly observed our coming future:

If God is dead, somebody is going to have to take his place. It will be megalomania or erotomania, the drive for power or the drive for pleasure, the clenched fist or the phallus, Hitler or Hugh Hefner.⁴²



Will it be power and an Orwellian future where a dominant power rules every inch of life? Or will it be a Brave New World where we are stupefied by our pleasures? There is another path. We could actually listen to Solomon. It has been said that smart people learn from their mistakes and wise people learn from the mistakes of others.⁴³ We can listen to the Preacher and hear what he says in his reflections on life; in doing so we might be led to the answer to our questions. In the face of Jesus we just might find the solution to our doubts and end up satisfied in the lover and maker of our world.

Living Beyond the Sun

As we conclude I want to close with one final interesting fact about Ecclesiastes. Though it is part of Holy Scripture, the very word of God, God himself never speaks in this book as we just hear the musings of a man's mind. Yet in the absence of the voice of God we hear him speak boldly and loudly. Peter Kreeft, in musing on God's silence in Ecclesiastes writes the following:

It [Ecclesiastes] is like a silhouette of the rest of the Bible...it is revelation by darkness rather than by light. In this book God reveals to us exactly what life is when God does not reveal to us what life is. Ecclesiastes frames the Bible as death frames life.⁴⁴

Indeed, Ecclesiastes is not the whole Bible, only one part. Its role in Holy Scripture is to place in us a crisis of heart and a longing for something more than the weary mundaneness of most existence. It is a place that longs for truth, goodness and beauty to break in and defeat the vanity of life under the sun. It is a place of longing for God to speak. Scripture is the story of just this the breaking in and speaking of God to people in a fallen creation. Throughout Scripture we see God's invasion of history through Jesus Christ. In Jesus the eternal enters the now and takes us beyond the sun. At Christmas we celebrate this, the divine being born in Bethlehem. During Holy Week we celebrate this, God dying for us and then being raised on that first Easter morning. His final coming and judgment will too invade the present world of underthesunlings. We will either meet this judgment with joy as his children or with great distress as those who lived in perpetual rebellion against our maker.

⁴² Quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *The Real Face of Atheism*, Revised and Updated ed. (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2004), 32.

⁴³The saying is a bit proverbial. I have seen it online attributed to business leader Norm Brodsky and I actually heard it recently from current UFC fighter and former marine Brian Stann on ESPN2's MMA Live broadcast.

⁴⁴ Kreeft, 23.

Ultimately Ecclesiastes teaches us that life is anchored not under the sun but in eternity. Our health, our wealth, can be lost, but God will not lose his people. Our bodies and our bank accounts may perish but the one who does the will of the Lord will live forever. We follow our King now through the mists and fogs and vanities of the world; but we receive the greatest counsel as the pages of the Preacher close. "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." As those who live upon the other side of the cross of Jesus we have an even more certain hope. We follow the one who is God, who fully kept all the commandments and died for us to make us his kids. For us at Jacob's Well the word is true: Fear God, trust in Jesus and take great joy in God's good gifts. Our party not only begins under the sun, but it will last for eternity.

Good news friends, good news...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Reid S. Monaghan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Reid S. Monaghan

Founder & President, Power of Change

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