

Ecclesiastes 1 (New American Standard Bible)

¹The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
²"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher,
"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."
³What advantage does man have in all his work
Which he does under the sun?
⁴A generation goes and a generation comes,
But the earth remains forever.
⁵Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;
And hastening to its place it rises there again.
⁶Blowing toward the south,
Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along;
And on its circular courses the wind returns.
⁷All the rivers flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is not full.
To the place where the rivers flow,
There they flow again.
⁸All things are wearisome;
Man is not able to tell it.
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
Nor is the ear filled with hearing.
⁹That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done is that which will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun.
¹⁰Is there anything of which one might say,
"See this, it is new"?
Already it has existed for ages

Which were before us.

¹¹There is no remembrance of earlier things;
And also of the later things which will occur,
There will be for them no remembrance
Among those who will come later still.

¹²I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

¹³And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning
all that has been done under heaven It is a grievous task which
God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.

¹⁴I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun,
and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.

¹⁵What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking
cannot be counted.

¹⁶I said to myself, "Behold, I have magnified and increased
wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and
my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge."

¹⁷And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and
folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind.

¹⁸Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing
knowledge results in increasing pain.

"Vanities of Vanities, all is vanity"

What is the author of Eccl trying to say? Is everything "meaningless" – as translated in the NIV? Is everything without purpose, is everything pointless, futile, is everything absurd? Is everything so fleeting that it becomes a "chasing after the wind?" This word, heh'vel, is used all throughout Eccl. Its literal meaning is "breath, vapor," from which we can derive the idea of fleeting, vain, and ineffectual. Some would take this word to mean "meaningless" not in the sense that it has no meaning, but that the meaning is incomprehensible, absurd (8:17). What ever the exact sense of the word is... it is undeniably negative.

A first reading of Eccl might leave a reader feeling rather hopeless about life. Though written thousands of years ago, the book of Eccl sounds strangely modern and seems to resonate with our culture. Perhaps you've heard some of the following sayings before:

"Eat, Drink and be Merry, for tomorrow we die!"

"Life is short, play hard"

"It all amounts to nothing in the end"

"Life sucks, then we die"

Here's a longer quote from a well-known comedian:

"Most people think life sucks, and then you die. Not me. I beg to differ. I think life sucks, then you get cancer, then your dog dies, your wife leaves you, the cancer goes into remission, you get a new dog, you get remarried,

you owe ten million dollars in medical bills but you work hard for thirty-five years and you pay it back and then -- one day -- you have a massive stroke, your whole right side is paralyzed, you have to limp along the streets and speak out of the left side of your mouth and drool but you go into rehabilitation and regain the power to walk and the power to talk and then -- one day -- you step off a curb at Sixty-seventh Street, and BANG you get hit by a city bus and then you die.
Maybe.”

My apologies if this cynicism did not make you laugh. But cynical humor is one of the ways people cope with disappointment and disillusionment about life. Life is not only short, but it sucks! This outlook sees life as brief, hard, and especially unrewarding because we still all die in the end. To use the words of the author of Eccl, we "toil under the sun", there is no remembrance, and worse yet, all our toil "with wisdom, knowledge, and skill" will be left to others who didn't work for it.

"Vanities of Vanities, all is vanity." But is this true?

[Of course it's true.. it's in the bible!] But lets be honest with ourselves. Is all of life in vain? Yes? No? ... Sometimes?

This morning, I want to invite you into a deeper look into Eccl and think about how you perceive life and what has influenced you in your perception. Please know that this is just the beginning or part of a longer conversation. A conversation that you can have with friends, family, your social community, and a conversation you can have with God. Eccl is, in the end, a commentary and reflection on life, and I want to argue that the number one influence on the author's perspective on life, is his relationship with God. And in doing so, I want to argue that the major influence on your perspective on life, is your relationship with God, whether or not you believe that relationship even exists.

Now it's a bit tricky when I say "author." Traditionally it was thought that Solomon was the author, but closer studies have led many to believe that Eccl was written by a person taking on the persona of Solomon. Part of the evidence is that he calls himself Qohelet and not Solomon. Moreover, there are at least two voices, or narrators, in Eccl. The main body is spoken by this Solomon persona, but this narration is framed by another. This second voice begins the book in 1:1-11 and provides a crucial commentary at the end in of chapter 12. We'll come back to that. But for our purposes, I'm going to assume that there's one author, writing in the voice of Solomon, then commenting on it.

"Qohelet" is the title in Hebrew. In the Greek, it's translated as " Ἐκκλησιαστοῦ" or Ecclesiastes. Qohelet is a nickname, its meaning is linked to 1 Kings 8 and the story of the dedication of the Temple to God. Solomon gathered the people for an assembly. Qohelet literally means "the one who Assembles" or "Assembler." Teacher or preacher can a bit misleading, so I'm going to refer to this voice as Qohelet.

What did Qohelet do? "13And I set my mind to seek and explore **by** wisdom concerning

all that has been done under heaven." Therefore, he gathered information about life, in particular, human life. He observed and reflected on his own experiences. These reflections include interpretation; he wanted to explain life, not just report on it.

The major themes of Qohelet's reflections are introduced in the first chapter: the fruitlessness of human toil, the repetitiveness of life, the lack of a real legacy, and the futility of wisdom itself. Qohelet asks rhetorically: "What advantage is there from all this heavy, wearisome labour?" Work/toil is a "grievous task," a heavy burden, unhappy business, that God gives to people. Curiously, the first mention of God is in vs. 13 and what does he say? God is the giver of difficult tasks.

Life endlessly repeats itself: generations come and go, the sun rises and sets, the wind turns round and round, the streams endlessly flows, what has been will be, what has been done is what will be done. All things are wearisome; there is nothing new under the sun.

People are forgotten, and later Qohelet realizes that all his work will simply be left to another who hasn't worked. Wisdom, though beneficial in life, becomes vanity because the same fate befalls on both wise and foolish. What happens to the fool will happen to him also. So he hated life (2:17) and he hated toil (2:18), because he who has toiled with wisdom, knowledge and skill must leave it all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it (2:20). In his despair, he comes to another conclusion about God.

2:24 A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? ²⁶ To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

God gives toil to human beings and he also gives them the ability to enjoy it. And yet, Qohelet concludes, this is meaningless, incomprehensible, absurd, fleeting. A chasing after the wind.

Further study of Eccl reveals that Qohelet sees God as sovereign. That God has a plan but does not reveal it, that he will bring everyone to judgment, but Qohelet is not expecting justice. In fact, Qohelet is uncertain about any afterlife at all (3:20-21 *All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. ²¹ Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?*) God exists, but he doesn't seem to care (9:11 ¹ *So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands, but no one knows whether love or hate awaits them.*). It is curious that throughout Eccl there is no mention of God's love. God appears to be very distant, and arbitrary.

Qohelet presents an unorthodox view in light of the rest of the canon of scripture, yet it is a true assessment of life apart from God. Can anything be more despairing than the thought that God exists but he doesn't care about what we do or who we are? Can anything be more despairing than the thought that God exists but there is no justice? It's

no wonder that Qohelet finds that increasing wisdom and knowledge only leads to more sorrow and grief (1:18).

Therefore: one ought to enjoy life while they can. Eat, drink, be merry – pursue pleasure now, because you don't know what tomorrow will bring.

"Vanities of Vanities, all is vanity" Meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless.

But that is not the end of the book. The epilogue is the key. 12:9-14

There are two ways of reading this epilogue: praise or critique. Certainly the second narrator starts with praise. Qohelet sought to write truth correctly, but as one commentator notes: it is truth "under the sun" and apart from God. It is uncertain if the images of "goads and nails" was meant to be a good thing or a bad thing... but it does connote pain. The second narrator then warns his son: writing of books is endless, excess devotion to books is wearisome. (Calls to mind 1:8). The second voice does not end with the same conclusion as Qohelet, instead he concludes with: Fear God and keep His commandments" why? Because God will bring every act to judgment. Everything one does, does matter.

It seems to me that Qohelet's narration was used to teach what happens to one's perception of life when one's perception of God is, for the lack of a better word, distorted. Life becomes absurd, incomprehensible, and, for Qohelet – detestable. Any enjoyment of life is a distraction (5:20), and death becomes the final answer to all.

I believe that our society has been writing their book of Ecclesiastes. Put in another way, the thought of Qohelet is brought to its next conclusion. The difference now is that God does not exist. The existence of God is no longer assumed. Where is the meaning? Well, it's as numerous as the population. For some, the purpose of life is to simply live, to enjoy, to find happiness. And in the land of plenty which is ours, many people believe that it is their right to pursue happiness. Heard of bucket lists? You make a list of all the things you want to accomplish before you die, or "kick the bucket." It's a way to feel achievement so that you can feel satisfied that you have done something with your short and precious life. We can go on and on, about all the things, relationships, experiences that people find their meaning and purpose in. Eat, drink, be merry for tomorrow you die. The alternative, is to live without meaning, to live in absurdity. Because life sucks, and then you die.

However, and in light of the New Testament, there is huge "however," God has given us a different "epilogue." Death is not the final answer. And we know this because of the life, the sufferings, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus Christ. By the cross, death has been conquered! He has given his life so that we may live, now and forever, as children of God. Our lives is being reinterpreted by His life, and therefore your life does matter to God. It is not in vain. Remember and celebrate, what Christ has done.

I long to say this with more conviction but I have to admit, it's a message that I need to

hear: Jesus' life has reinterpreted mine. Everything becomes different when I, in faith, begin to follow him. Everything changes when my view of Him changes. Oh, I doubt his goodness sometimes, especially when I see or hear about awful injustices. And I think to myself, not "what a wonderful world" but "God do you care?" I would rather believe that he didn't exist than believe that he does and has his back turned to the world.

But Jesus. But Jesus. I can't dismiss the person of Jesus and what He has done. Yes, God cares, and he has shown it and continues to show it, even under the sun.

Questions:

What gives people meaning today?

What distorts your view of God?

Do you agree or disagree that your perception of God affects your perception of life?

How would you write an "epilogue" to today's book of Ecclesiastes?