

# Ecclesiastes P1: Hevel

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## Exploring My Strange Bible Podcast

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## **Ecclesiastes P1: Hevel**

Tim Mackie: Hey everybody. I'm Tim Mackie and this is my Podcast, Exploring my Strange Bible.

I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have.

On this podcast, I'm putting together the last 10 years' worth of lectures and sermons where I have been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith and I hope this could be helpful for you too.

I also help start this thing called The Bible Project. We make animated videos and podcast about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find those resources at the [BibleProject.com](http://BibleProject.com). With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

Alright, this is the first of a new three-part series on the book of Ecclesiastes. That's one of the more odd, and unique books of the Old Testament; contains all kinds of fascinating and even scandalous ideas that you won't find elsewhere in the Old Testament.

These were three teachings that I did as a teaching pastor at A Door of Hope church and this first message, this is going to unpack one of the most important metaphors and words in the book itself. The Hebrew word is "hevel" which means vapor or smoke and you will discover what does it means in the teachings that follows. But just for one visual thing that happens in the method that you won't see because you are listening on the podcast is at one point, I pull out my new employee gift that I received when I came on the pastoral staff at Door of Hope, which was a hand-carved, Old Danish pipe and a bag of really a high-end English smoking tobacco. And that is what I light and smoke on stage during the message while I was giving the teaching. And if you are wondering why I do that, well you just have to listen, and you will discover.

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But anyway, welcome to part one of an exploration on Ecclesiastes, so let's dive in.

We are starting a new series here tonight, yes. And what book of the Bible? Ecclesiastes, so I invite you to open your Bibles with me to the book of Ecclesiastes. It's kind of in the middle-ish, if you need your table of contents, no shame in that. Did you know that there's a table of contents in your Bible? In every Bible you have ever opened, there is a table of contents. No shame in using that thing, no. And I'm telling you, especially when you are looking through a book that's only, like, 8 pages long like Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 1:1: "The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. "Meaningless! Meaningless!" Says the Teacher "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless. What do people gain from all of their labors at which they toil under the sun?" What have you learned at church tonight? So, what? Okay, so that's interesting. What on earth is this book doing in the Bible? This is not what I expect to find when I open up the Bible. That might be the response of many of us that we've had to Ecclesiastes and the pastor that you're having right now.

And some of you are wondering, what on earth are we going to do for the next month and a half, right? Through this book, because you've got it right there. If you want to know what the book is about, you just read the two key phrases that will occur over forty times throughout the rest of the book and that is meaningless and life under the sun, so I think that will suffice. Amen, right? Let me pray. So, wow, what is going on here?

Why is this book in the Bible and why we are going to spend a month and a half exploring it together? And the fact is, this is one of the most beautiful, profound and dark books in all of the scriptures.

Many books in the Bible have a positive function of teaching us things that we couldn't know anywhere else, revealing us God's character, God's heart for the world, what He's up to and so on.

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The book of Ecclesiastes is not positive. It actually has a negative role in the Bible. The book of Ecclesiastes is essentially time to deconstruct everything that you thought you knew about life and the world and to reduce it to your knees by the end.

So that the good news can, in fact, become good news. Because often, the good news about Jesus comes to us as people who are actually quite content with life, or at least we think we are or at least we think that true contentment and fulfillment in the side of the new creation and Jesus' return, we think it's actually maybe quite possible and we actually spend most of our waking hours trying to pursue deep levels of happiness, and fulfillment, and contentment. And the book of Ecclesiastes is just going to throw a big wet blanket on your life for the next month and a half.

Why we are doing this, exploring this negative book of the Bible? There's a lots of different reasons why, I'm going to focus on one tonight. Joshua will focus on another one next week.

This book of the Bible is aiming at a very common mindset, a pattern of thinking that's very, very prevalent. It's prevalent in the office day, it's prevalent in our day. And I call this pattern of thinking, the myth of religious fulfillment. And it's the idea of that- it's very prevalent, especially in religious communities. It's the idea that, you know, I get religion in whatever form. In this case we are Community of Jesus, so Jesus religion or whatever.

So, I follow God, I follow Jesus, I do the God thing for a reason. We may not be very explicit about it but the driving motive behind it is I do this religious God, Jesus thing so that my life is enhanced as a result of it. It's like yoga or Pilates or something. You don't do it unless you think you're going to get something out of it, right?

And so- So, I believe that my life will be enhanced and it's the mindset that essentially says God's role in my life is to make things go better so that my life gets better. So that maybe I don't have as many problems, so that maybe I can become a better, happier kind

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of person and so on and I can live a happier life and be good and the things will go well.

It's the myth of religious fulfillment. I invite God into my life so that my life will go better. Now there's a whole bunch of us in the room who are like, "Yes, so good." That- like that person sitting next to me is hearing that right now, right?

Or like, it's so good for so many people in the room to hear. Let's peel back the layers quick here. I'm going to do it gently. Book of Ecclesiastes will peel back the layers in not-so gentle of a way, right? So, on how we think and how we actually kind of deceive ourselves.

So, you know that you have great expectations about what God is going to do in your life. Usually, we don't think about them. We just assume God is up to something in our lives, at least we hope that He is. But we are very aware of what God is not doing what we expected in our lives when life gets very hard, when things get difficult. So, you know what your expectations are when your expectations are lying in pieces in front of you on the floor. That's kind of how life goes in general. I don't know if it's the same, powerful, to you but it was a powerful experience at least for me.

I'm going to reach back to 1999, anybody? Anybody? A very important movie. I realized, I keep thinking of illustrations of the movies that I don't like, so I should probably think of a new kind of illustration, but this is the best one I can think of.

So, 1999, a very important trilogy released and started. 1999, anybody? Trilogy?

Yeah, the second trilogy of Star Wars which was, perhaps, the greatest flop in American cinematic history, right? I was raised on the original Star Wars trilogy. I have, like, the action figures and the Millennium Falcon in the cloud cities thing, you know. I listen to cassettes when I was a kid and I would just play it over and over and over again when I was little kid, and so on.

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So, the original trilogy had just this epic status in my mind, it formed my imaginative universe since I was growing up as a kid. I had no idea, I had huge expectations when I walked in to the movie theater in 1999, right? And I was like, "This is going to be as epic as the original trilogy."

And I was sorely disappointed, right? Right? So, Jar Jar Binks who was was thinking, you know what I'm saying? Like, it was the most ridiculous, blasphemous character introduced in that story.

But anyway, so- and the whole trilogy felt that way. Each movie I saw I was like, "Are you kidding me? I just paid money to see that, what a waste of time." So that's how I felt.

What's funny is, I did not realize the expectations I had going into that movie theater until my expectations were dashed to pieces sitting on the floor in front of you, you know what I'm saying? And this how life is. We like to think that we are kind of wise and have control over expectations, but reality is, we all come to life with all kinds of expectations that we don't even know were there until reality takes a very different turn.

It's true in life, it's true in movies and it's absolutely true in our spiritual journey as well.

We have all kinds of default modes in our thinking, the myth of religious self-fulfillment. And it's not just that some people think this way, I think it's that all of us move towards this kind of thinking at multiple points throughout our lives.

Why is God in my life? Why am I doing this Jesus thing in the first place? Well, I hope to get something out of it. And I know that I'm hoping to get something out of it when I'm not getting anything out of it, you know what I'm saying? It's, like, it becomes very clear to me that, like, yeah, my life is not getting better.

And I'm like, "Why did I invite Jesus into my life in the first place?" And I'm like, "My life is actually getting worse and it seems like my

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prayers aren't being answered the way I thought they would. Or do my prayers make any difference at all? What is prayer in the first place?"

Many of us are there right now and many of us have been there or are going to be there, places in life where it actually becomes very difficult to believe in God, period. Or, to believe that God is good and that He cares about me or that He's involved in my life or in the world in any significant way.

And so, many people, they come to conclusions, they tried the Jesus thing, whatever. Didn't work for me. They ditched belief in God, they ditched their faith. Those are possible conclusions.

But Ecclesiastes is going to open up another possible conclusion that we can draw when God is doing in my life exactly what I never expected or never wanted, or He doesn't seem to be doing anything in my life and what on earth is happening.

The book of Ecclesiastes is going to raise the possibility of, what if God is not the problem? What if my expectations were the problem? What I thought I was signing up for was actually some version of the myth of religious fulfillment. I'm going to invite God into my life to enhance my life, to make it better, solve my problems so that things- I'll be a happier, more successful person, or something like that.

We think, "No of course, I would never think like that." But think of the times of great disappointment. When it was not just a movie that flopped, when it's, like, your life that's a flop, you know.

And if among our first responses is to get angry at God, to blame God, what's happening there? What's happening is, hardship is the way of exposing our core beliefs, and our core commitments and values. What's being exposed there is that, well I guess, I thought the deal was I do the Jesus thing and then God makes my life better. And my life is not getting better, what's the disconnect?

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Maybe it's my expectations that need to be altered. And one of the things that the book of Ecclesiastes is aiming at is these grave distortions and misconceptions that we have about what we should expect out of life and what we should expect out of God's involvement in my life.

And any time you're reconfiguring your core beliefs about God or the world or whatever this is, just a painful experience and that's why reading the book of Ecclesiastes is going to be a painful experience for many of us.

Some of us are going to be deeply disturbed that a book like this is in the Bible. Others of us are going to experience the book of Ecclesiastes as like a breath of fresh air, like, finally somebody is talking about this.

So, we are calling this series the divine disconnect because it sort of like, well, I have these ideas about what it means for God to be involved in the world and in my life. And then I have, like, reality that seems to point in a whole other set of directions. How did those two go together?

The book of Ecclesiastes is exploring our struggle. It humanizes the struggle of what it means to live life here under the sun as he calls it.

So, this is a very important book. It became real to me at an important season in my own journey of following Jesus and our prayers, it could play that kind of role in the life of our church as well.

Ecclesiastes, let's go back to the beginning.

Ecclesiastes 1:1 "The words of the Teacher, a son of David the King in Jerusalem," actually if you read the book, you will find that the author of the book of Ecclesiastes is anonymous. In other words, nowhere in the book of Ecclesiastes or anywhere in the whole Bible

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does "here I am, dear reader. I'm Solomon," or "I'm so and so and here I am writing the book of Ecclesiastes to you."

Actually, you don't read that anywhere in the book. And look even closer here, look at the first sentence again. "The words of the Teacher, the son of David King in Jerusalem 'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher." Who's talking to you in the first sentence of the book? The Teacher? No. Do you see that there? Somebody else is introducing The Teacher to you. Whoever the author of the book is, it's not The Teacher. The main voice in the book is the voice of this Teacher, or some of your translations have The Preacher.

The Hebrew word is called Qoheleth. It just means one who gathers, one who speaks in the gathering. So, preacher, teacher, whatever. What am I doing right now? Preaching, teaching. I have no idea so, just talking. Someone who speaks in a gathering.

Most of the book is the voice of this Teacher. But at the beginning, it is not the Teacher speaking to us. But it's on here, turn to the last pages of the book. Just a couple of pages forward. Ecclesiastes 12:8 "'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Everything is meaningless. It ends as it begins.'" Now, not only was the Teacher wise but He also imparted knowledge to the people, He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. Who's talking to us right there? It's anonymous. The book is anonymous.

So, I think of the book of Ecclesiastes as, it's like sitting with your grandpa on the front porch. He's smoking his pipe and he's, you know, waxing eloquent about life on planet earth or something like that. He wants to tell you a story, right?

You're a grandchild sitting there on the front porch with grandpa. He wants to tell you a story of this great teacher from the ancient past. Wisest man in all of the world. And he said out on his journey, like a thought experiment, what if you can factor God out of the

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equation? What if this 70 years that we have here under the sun is all you got and then death.

Is life worth living? Is there anything of significance or value or ultimate purpose in the meaning of life if you factor God out of equation and I got 70 years and this is all I got. That's the great thought experiment of the Teacher. And grandpa is going to tell you this tale, of this experiment. This explorer, the Teacher.

And Grandpa is going to introduce the Teacher to you and then at the end, grandpa's going to have some concluding words to make sure you don't misunderstand what the Teacher was trying to say.

So, the author of the book Ecclesiastes is, go back to chapter one, the speaker of the voice or the Teacher is introduced to us as someone who's a Son of David, King in Jerusalem, and that's why we all said Solomon.

So traditionally, this figure in the book, the Teacher figure, the voice that we hear, has been associated with King Solomon. Now here's what interesting, go down to verse 16 of chapter One. We'll get in to the message of this book in a second, but I like history and background and stuff like these. Is this alright with you? Good. Okay, we'll go to 16 of chapter one.

The Teacher now is saying, "Now I said to myself 'Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anybody who has ruled over Jerusalem before me," He's going to go and say this about three more times: I was more wise, I was more wealthy, more powerful than all who are in Jerusalem before me.

Now, this is really Bible trivia, but if you know the story of the Old Testament Kings, how many kings were there in Jerusalem before Solomon? One. And who's that? His dad. David made Jerusalem the capital of the Israelite nation, that David brought together as tribes and formed them all as a nation.

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So, it seems kind of strange for Him to say over everybody in Jerusalem before me, namely my dad. That's kind of weird.

So, there are two basic views on who the Teacher is. One is that it's, historically, Solomon. These are memories and teachings preserved from King Solomon. That's one view that's been very common throughout history.

Another view is, there are many examples of this kind of writing in ancient Neuris It's called royal fictional autobiography. So, this is someone hundreds and hundreds of years later afterwards, writes a thought experiment essentially. It would be someone, like, 500 years from now wanting to write reflections on politics and culture in 21st century in America, writing it as if they were Barack Obama.

They're not trying to trick anybody because Barack Obama has been dead for 500 years, right? Everybody sees what's happening here. And the writer presents themselves as a Barack Obama-like figure. There are many examples of this among Israel's neighbors and so on, and so, some people thinks that that's what's happening here because if Solomon wrote it, why didn't he just say his name? It's almost elusive and never quite saying his name.

And so, I think this is actually clever. Whether Solomon wrote it or not, what's happening is, you're invited to see life as if you are Solomon-like figure, one of the most powerful, influential, wise kings. If anybody can speak to the question of the meaning of life here under the sun, who is the most qualified person in the biblical imagination? It's this guy, it's Solomon.

If anyone had a crack at making your 70 years the most awesome thing you could possibly imagine, it's this guy. He made gold as common as stones, we're told, in his kingdom. This guy has a chance. The ultimate weekend warrior, right? Except every day is a weekend for this guy, right?

And so, we're going to explore life as if we are in the shoes of this Solomon-like figure. And so, we're brought to the main theme right

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here in the first sentences of chapter two. And what's the basic conclusion? Apparently, in verse two, about the meaning of life, that is has none apparently.

So, the new international version has "meaningless." Others of you has translations that say "vanity." So, it might be English standard version or the King James, the New American translation. So, vanity is kind of historically in English translations where this has been used.

This is the core word. This word right here gets repeated 40 times throughout these 12 chapters. This is the key. If you want to understand the book of Ecclesiastes, you have to get what's going on with this word. Everything revolves around what the Teacher means by this word.

So, vanity is what many of your translations have. And that's an okay translation, except in modern American English, vanity is something that you sit down to put on makeup, right? Or, we think of vanity as self-obsession and it's neither of those is what the Teacher means.

Meaningless is pretty good except meaningless would lead you to think that the Teacher has looked at everything in life and then is now making a conclusion there is no meaning, absolutely, whatsoever. And that's not- you look at the use of the word in the book and that's not what it means.

The word that's going to be used 40 times over in these 12 chapters is the Hebrew word, I'll teach it to you here, "hevel." So, hevel is brilliant. I told you, this book is beautiful and brilliant all at once.

It's a metaphor. Literally, it means smoke or vapor. And what he's going to do is he's going to run everything through this grid. He's going to do all these little thought experiments. And so, I saw, like, a guy who's really wealthy and he died alone and poor. It's hevel, he'll say.

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I saw a righteous man and he's really good and everybody loved him but then all his kids died, and horrible things happened to them. That's hevel. He's going to do all these thought experiments about how screwed up life is here under the sun. And he's constantly going to call it hevel, hevel, hevel, over and over and over again.

Now, I think the capture- this is so brilliant, what he's doing. It's the metaphor. We actually need to somehow play with fire and smoke to get what he's doing. So lucky for me, I live in Portland, which is the land of where young men try to act like their grandpas.

And Josh was inviting me to become a pastor here at Door of Hope a year ago actually. He said, one of the benefits, he told me, was that I'll be able to get my own pipe. And so, he gave me this old hand-carved Danish pipe, where I have been really enjoying it. And then, I've been surprised to learn how many young men liked to smoke pipes like their grandpas.

So, would you mind? Look quick here and then I need you to create some smoke. It's there but then it just takes about five seconds. So that's the first meaning that the Teacher is going to attach to this word hevel. It's here and it's gone. It's fleeting.

So, look, for example, in chapter 11, he says "Those who lived many years should rejoice in all of them." Hey, as long as you're alive, yeah, they should remember that the days of darkness will be many. And he does not mean just death, he also means the days where your body begins to really fail that precede death. We talked about that in Chapter 12.

All of it comes, your short life? It's hevel. And this is the problem that happens. It goes out, right? So that's a pretty natural meaning that you would attach to hevel. It's here and then it's gone.

But that's not the main way the Teacher uses this concept of hevel. This other one is quite sophisticated and that's how he used it the most time. And it's this one right here: to mean enigma or paradox.

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Again, Chapter 8, he says, here's something that's hevel. He says, "Good people get what the wicked deserve and wicked people get what good people deserve." What's that? That's hevel, that's right? Now what does he mean?

He doesn't mean that's temporary, because no. What he's saying is that's how it is here. It's not fleeting, this kind of thing happens all the time. What does he mean? I didn't anticipate this. I hope you stay lit.

Is smoke a thing, but yet when I tried to grab it, it's like it's not a thing. It's the air but it's not there. Is smoke real? Totally, there it is. We're all looking at it. But then the moment I try and make sense of it, to do something, to grasp at it, it's gone.

This is the Teacher's view of how we experience life here under the sun. Everything is hevel, everything. The moment you think you have life figured out, you don't. It's like that how you know you don't have life figured out is by the fact that you do think you have it figured it out. You know what I'm saying? Like, that's how you know.

So we all have this concept of, like, justice, for example. So, this kind of thing shouldn't happen. Wicked people shouldn't get what good people deserve, good people- that shouldn't happen, but it does. We have this concept of justice, if you do one thing you ought to get a certain result. Do the right, you ought to get what you deserve. Do the bad thing, you ought to get what you deserve. Are we all on the same page?

That's how the world ought to work. Does it work like that? Sometimes it works like that. Does it always work like that? No, that's hevel. Why? Why doesn't it work the way it's supposed to? I mean if we have a sense that it ought to work a certain way, why doesn't it work like that?

And because our sense of justice is rooted in God's justice, that God is the one who is the ground of what is right and wrong. Well, what

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that does it mean about God? That sometimes, justice takes place but sometimes justice doesn't take place. Why? What is that? That's hevel.

It's hevel. It is very important. Look at verse two. He's saying everything's hevel, hevel, hevel. I can't grab at it. So, it says in verse three, "What do people gain from all of their labors of which they are toiling-" Where? Under the sun, which is his second key idea here in the whole book. This gets repeated 30 times throughout the whole book.

Main idea of the book of Ecclesiastes is, "life is hevel under the sun." And under the sun is his thought experiment.

Well, what if you factor God out of the equation? What if these 70 years is all that I have and I'm just trying to make sense of the meaning of life from what I can see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Five senses and this is all that I got, 70 years and let's get this thing to go.

What do we have of lasting, meaningful value here? And he's going to say, you get some things that are pretty good. You can have a great, like, meal and that's fun, you know. You can meet a spouse, that's pretty great, you know. You can have meaningful work and enjoy that but most likely, some seriously hevel things are going to happen to you in your life.

And that just throws a whole system off. And this might- this is like, if that's all we've got then there's no life under the sun.

Now what he's going to do is, because we're coming at this, like, thousands of years later, post-Jesus. And we're like, "Yeah, but that's not the whole picture." And he's going to wait on that. He knows that that's not the whole picture, he knows that.

He's going to wait till Chapter 12 to give that to you though. You have to sit through the thought experiment. What if the 70 years is

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all you got under the sun? It's hevel. It's sometimes good, it's sometimes bad but you don't know, and you can't predict.

And so, a big part of this is what he's aiming at is what I call the myth of religious fulfillment and this is really brilliant, I think, what's happening here.

There's three wisdom books. They're called the wisdom books of the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes is one of them. What are the other two? Proverbs and Job. Now, here's what's interesting about the book of Proverbs. Let's actually just read a section right here to get a sample of it.

Famous passage from Proverbs, it says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and don't lean on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight. Don't be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones."

Does this sound like a good deal? A great deal, you know what I'm saying? Like, healthy body, strong bones? Who needs vitamin D, you know what I'm saying? Like, just, you know, fear the Lord and apparently, you'll have strong bones, so that's great.

So, Proverbs is full of this. It's full of this idea that if I do the right thing, fear the Lord, honor the Lord, if the myth of religious fulfillment has biblical grounding anywhere, there you go right there. Trust in the Lord, straight paths, healthy body, strong bones, who could say no, you know?

Here's what's tricky, is that the book of Proverbs is the book of proverbs. It's not a book of promises, it's the book of proverbs. And what has happened throughout Jewish and Christian history, is that the book of Proverbs is taken as a book of promises.

Proverbs, by the very nature, are saying, here's how life tends to work out most of the time. If you go through life with your upstanding integrity, super great work ethics, you're a hard worker,

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you cultivate healthy relationships, character and virtue, is life likely to go a little better for you than if you're just a persistent liar, a cheat, you steal, and you burn relational bridges everywhere you go? Who's likely to have, like, generally more content happy life?

Right, the first person. But is that always the case? This is my favorite one, Proverbs 13:9 "The light of the righteous rejoices, but the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out."

It's like, those who honor and fear the Lord, you have a light in your house and that's awesome because you can see, and everything is clear. But if you don't honor the Lord and you do evil, it's like, your lamp will get snuffed out.

Proverbs 24:20 "The evil man has no future hope; and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out." Now, is that how life can go here under the sun? These proverbs? Does this happen? Totally, this totally happens. Does it happen all the time?

The book of Job comes along, and it says, how often is the lamp of the wicked put out really, right? So, does that calamity really ever come? I mean, I guess I've seen that sometimes, but I don't see it all of the time.

Ecclesiastes, he says I've seen a righteous man who perishes despite his righteousness and a wicked man who has a long life despite of his wickedness. It's hevel. It doesn't make any sense. It seems like justice is real, we all know it. We all try to live by it, but we mostly fail at it and we don't see it at work. It's hevel.

And here's what's happening here. If you have a superficial view of what the Bible is, if you just think the Bible is, like, golden tablets, like, dropped out of heaven or something and it's just, like, all commands about how you should live, then this going to bother you because it's going to be, like, there's a contradiction in the Bible. But especially, that's not what the Old Testament books are.

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The three wisdom books of the Old Testament, I think of as three ancient Israelites, say, just going into a bar to have a drink and to talk about how life works. And the book of Proverbs starts the conversation by saying, "This is what I've seen. I see people do this: They honor God, they shun evil, they fear the Lord, life will tend to go a lot better."

And Ecclesiastes, you're going to read. The Teacher says, "In many places, that's totally true. But it's not true all the time." And that bothers them to death. It bothers them.

So, he's going to highlight those examples, all three of the wisdom books to give you a holistic understanding of what it means to be a human being and to be in relationship to this God who's working out His purposes here in the world but Whose purposes I don't always understand.

One of my favorite Old Testament scholars, he puts it this way. He says the most challenging difference between the wisdom books arises when one author, like the Teacher in Ecclesiastes, when he doubts or questions the validity of basic affirmations in other parts of the Bible.

But this is precisely the purpose of the books in the collection of scripture. They compel us to an honest faith that's willing to acknowledge the presence of doubt that we cannot dismiss and questions that we can't always fully answer given our human limitations. Some of you are deeply bothered right now. Some of you, this is a breath of fresh air, alright.

When the Teacher says life is a hevel, it's an enigma, it's like I can see it but I can't grasp at it, does that rule out the possibility that life has any meaning at all? In other words, when he says it's hevel, is he saying there's no meaning whatsoever? Is that what he is saying? There's no reason. He's just saying, I sure can't figure it out. Or maybe in meaning, I just can't grasp what it is. And here we come down to it.

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It's that, very often, the myth of religious self-fulfillment paints a very black and white world. I do the religion thing and God's going to do His thing, which is straight paths, healthy bones. Like, that's how it works to enhance my life.

But then we came across life experiences that just break all of that down and, right, this doesn't seem to work. And then it exposes our core assumptions about God. Well, God must not be real, or He must not be good or He must not love or care for me.

And the book of Ecclesiastes creates this middle space. This is, what if I just have the wrong set of expectations altogether? What if God's promise to me under the sun, by which he means in this broken world compromised by evil, compromised by sin, what if God's promise to me is actually not to solve all my problems? What if that was never His promise to me?

What if His promise to me was actually not that my life may go better and that all of my dreams may come true? What if His promise to me, which is later revealed in the process, that God actually enters into the hevel of human existence and takes it into Himself on the cross?

And what if you and I are left in the position of great humility, where even though I may not be able to grasp of what the meaning of life is, am I going to presume to say, therefore, life has no meaning because I can't figure out what it is? That's the punch in the gut of Ecclesiastes.

Just because I can't see the sense or the meaning, it does not mean that there's no sense. That's a wrestling match that we have with hardship and difficulty in our lives. We're done with three verses, holy cow.

What he's going to do is he's going to relentlessly show the small, fleeting, fragile position that we are in as human creatures living in a broken, compromised world.

## **Ecclesiastes P1: Hevel**

Verse 3: "A lot people gain from all their labors at which they toil here under the sun." I mean, generations come, and generations go but the earth, I mean, it's just here, you know what I'm saying? Like, I got to just think about this. It's like, think of all of the fashion trends Mount Tabor has seen come and gone, you know what I'm saying?

So, everything, you know. Like, knickers and, like, high socks on men or something, but also bell buttons and, you know, also smoking pipes, like multiple iterations of smoking pipes, right?

So, here we are, like, creating culture and working and so important in what we are doing, in relationships, everything is at stake here. And Mount Tabor is just like, what? You know what I mean? It's just there. It was there a long time before, it's going to be there a long time after.

The sun rises, the sun sets. It hurries back to where it rises. The wind, it blows to the south and then turns to the north and it goes round and round and round. Always returning on its course. Or think about the streams, how they flow into the sea, but the sea is never full. Isn't that weird?

So, when I fill up my bathtub, it gets full. But the Columbia river is a mile wide with 1200 miles of water behind it pushing thousands of cubic feet into the ocean every single second, but the ocean doesn't raise. That's weird.

It's weird, he says. That's weird. To the place where the streams came from, they just return there again. It's all so wearisome. More than one because all this activity, but nothing ever changes.

It's just like, what do we think we're doing here? Like, we think we are all self-important and so many that's happening with my life and my story. And then- but it's, like, Mount Tabor and the Columbia River, you know. Who am I, really?

## **Ecclesiastes P1: Hevel**

The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. I can listen to my favorite album of 2012 and the moment it's over, well, I want to do it again. Well, won't that be ever be enough? I don't know.

It's sort of, I think the same thing about, like, pizza. I'm never tired of eating pizza. Like, what is that? It's just never- the moment I'm full, and, like, the moment the hunger, like, comes back again, I want another one, you know what I'm saying? And what's going on? It's just constant.

When really, everything is really quite predictable here, but nothing ever changes. What has been will be again and what has been done will be done again. I mean, there's nothing new here under the sun.

Is there anything of which someone can say, "Look, here is something new." I was thinking about this. So, we could maybe interject and say, I have an iPhone that's pretty new. This was, again, Marshall McLuhan, this was his theory about technology in general.

All technology does is take out bodies and just create new, more fancy extensions of them. So, all iPhone is, is a fancy extension of our ear and our mouth and our to-do list. That's basically it.

We can talk to each other, like, more efficiently in theory, right? Except we're also multitasking at the same time. And it helps us do things better, but humans have been talking and listening and trying to do things like forever. So, it's not really new. It's just a new way of doing the old thing.

Is there anything of which someone can say, like, this is new? No, it's here already a long time ago. It was here before our time.

Nobody remembers the former generations. Even those yet to come won't be remembered by those who follow them. Who knows their great, great, great grandpa's full name?

So, I, the Teacher who was King over Israel and Jerusalem, I applied my mind to study and explore by wisdom, and here it means by my

## **Ecclesiastes P1: Hevel**

five senses, just scoping out, like, everything that's here done under the heavens.

A heavy burden God has laid on mankind. I've seen the things that are done here under the sun. It's all hevel, it's like chasing wind. You ever tried that and succeeded? No, you haven't.

What is crooked can't be straightened. What is lacking cannot be counted. It's all proverb here. We all have a sense that something is deeply, deeply wrong with the world and with ourselves, but we can't seem to fix it.

Some people are aware of the problem, some people aren't, some people are in the middle, but we can't seem to fix it. We can throw money on it, through government, education, at the human condition. But we all have this awareness, it's crooked and we can't make it straight.

I said to myself, "So, look. I've increased my wisdom more than anybody who's ruled over Jerusalem, before me I've experienced wisdom and knowledge. I've applied myself to the understanding of wisdom," but also madness. In fact, he's going to run the whole spectrum of human experience.

And I learned this too, it's chasing after the wind for with much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge you have, the more sorry you are that you have all that knowledge. So, you are at this podium in front of me and my alternative, my, like, other life would have been as, like, a scientist or physicist or something. I'm horrible at math so I can never do that.

But anyhow, so you have, like, this podium here in front of me and so, you know, you get into the room of, like, physics, particle physics and you learned that actually, what appears to us as very solid and what almost hit Josh in the face last week, and so, when it kind of went up like that, and so it's very hard. But actually, you learned that it's composed of molecules that are themselves composed of little

## **Ecclesiastes P1: Hevel**

things called atoms, but themselves composed of little components, right? The nucleus and the proton.

And actually, what an atom is, mostly, it's empty space. Because what it means is that in reality, this podium is more not here than it is here, right?

And many are like, I like life better before I knew particles physics. And every single human endeavor, whether, like, it's justice or beauty or music, you can take everything, and you run it down to the core and it's all so complex and hevel. And that's the human condition.

We all know something's horribly wrong but none of us seem to know to be able to do anything about it. And life is hard. And it's hard to follow God in these circumstances, in these conditions. It's especially hard if you're under the illusion that God's role in your life is to make your, like golden path to your dreams, you know what I mean? You're just setting yourself up for disappointment. You need to deconstruct your expectations.

As I said, Ecclesiastes performs a negative role in the Bible and you can still see it. It's just going to come chapter after chapter. Until he's going to shine a very bright light in the last paragraph of the book.

Chapter 12:9, the author of the book, grandpa, sitting on his porch, he says, "Not only was the Teacher wise, he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs, like you read in the book here.

The Teacher searched to find just the right words and what he wrote was upright and true."

Ecclesiastes has its handle on a very experience that we all resonate with, here in the life under the sun. If this is all there is, this is a really sound place. And that's right and that's true to come to that conclusion.

## **Ecclesiastes P1: Hevel**

He says the words of the wise, they're like goads, and their collected sayings are, like, firmly embedded nails given by one shepherd. He's essentially, saying these books of wisdom in the Bible, they're like a stick with nails on the end that a shepherd uses to prod, like, sheep or oxen in the direction they want them to go.

Then, the Shepherd there is a metaphorical reference to God. So, God is inspired and given these wisdom books, all three of them. Three guys, they all have different perspective to give us the holistic view on human experience.

And the book of Ecclesiastes is going to hurt because this going to poke you and it's going to expose areas where you've bought into the myth of religious fulfillment. It's going to expose ways where I have a distorted view of myself or God and it's going to hurt when that stuff gets exposed inside of me.

But this exposure is taking place at the hands of a good shepherd who's trying to prod us in the direction that leads to life, which is what he says. He says, "Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them."

You're going to read endless books on people deconstructing everything and of the making of many such books, there is no end. And in fact, you're aware of your body in the process of reading them.

So here, everything has been heard. The conclusion of the matter: fear God, keep His commandments. This the duty of all mankind for God will bring every deed into judgment, every hidden thing, whether it's good or evil. This isn't with whiplash at the end of the book here.

Essentially what he's doing, and Josh unpacked this, so he's pulling the back of the curtain and saying, "But this, in fact, isn't all that there is. These 70 years aren't all that we have and in fact, every decision that we make does matter, but it matters in ways that I may not be able to see. I actually may not ever have a handle on why

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certain hardships enter my life. I may never grasp why it is that things don't make sense in my life and why that happened to me.

But does that mean that there is no meaning? And the Teacher, grandpa sitting on the porch, says no, no. But it's important that we disabuse ourselves of these distorted ways of thinking about God that set us up for a fall.

So, I realized, that was total firehose right there. And so, we're going to explore all of this again from lots of different angles in the book, but I think this is such a relevant word for us to hear especially in the city and in a culture where, dude, it's like, these 70 years, man, that's all you got. That's all that you got.

And even as Christians, we can get into that mindset as well and it sets us up for a fall. And ultimately, what the myth of religious fulfillment, what it does is it reverses the gospel. So, the gospel is telling me that God has the story of what He's working out to redeem the world and He's calling me to play a bit role in His story, to have His climax in the cross, in the resurrection of Jesus.

And the myth of religious fulfillment, it reverses it. It says, "Well, actually, it's about God being invited down to my story to make my story work out pretty well. And when that doesn't happen, I get angry and I blame God." And I was like, "Well, which way do you want it?" So, I don't know how this speaks a word to you. I don't know if it's like a goad to you or if it encourages you down the path that you're already on but ultimately, what I think- I'll end with these words, of a guy named Robert Short.

This is what Ecclesiastes can do for us in the journey of following Jesus. He says, "Ecclesiastes is essentially a kind of negative theologian. He's asking questions that can be answered only by a future revelation of God. And clearing the road for this revelation, he smashes any and all false hopes to pieces. Ecclesiastes is the Bible's night before Christmas. Ecclesiastes is human self-sufficiency stretched to its absolute limit and found sadly wanting."

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And if that's where Ecclesiastes leaves us, that's where the bread and the cup that we're about to take as we enter into worship, that's where the songs that we're about to sing, they become Christmas. The coming of Christ to us, which can only be good news until I found my own myths and self-sufficiency sadly wanting.

It's the bad news before the good news and I believe it's God's words...

[End of transcription 47:10]