

Wisdom P3

Ecclesiastes E1: Not Another Proverbs

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Not Another Proverbs

Jon: The Book of Ecclesiastes is a unique book in the Bible that has delighted and confused Christians throughout the years. Where scripture reliance on ancient wisdom is core to understanding God's world, Ecclesiastes bases its wisdom off of experimentation.

Tim: There's no other book like it where you have this first-person voice who's telling you about a lifetime's worth of experiment. The book stages a big experiment where "I tried this, and I went and learned about this, and then here's what I concluded."

Jon: The conclusion of Ecclesiastes these is that life is hevel. Hevel. Hevel. Everything is hevel. While modern translations typically translate that Hebrew word into the word meaningless, in Hebrew it's literally the word for smoke or vapor.

Tim: Smoke is real. When you see it, a cloud of smoke, you look at it and go, "Oh, that's a thing. Look at it. I can see it. I can point at it." But smoke has this unique quality that when I reach out my hands to grab onto it, there's nothing there.

Jon: This metaphor that life is like smoke is lost in the translation that life is meaningless.

Tim: Because what the teacher isn't saying is, "I know all the answers and I declare to you that life is meaningless." What he's saying is, "I have discovered there's a glitch in the system and things that I thought were certain and true aren't always certain and true."

Jon: Hevel. Hevel. Everything is hevel.

Tim: He uses the word 38 times in this short 12-chapter book. Michael Fox, my doctoral advisor, he thought the best English word to capture it is absurd. Or I've come to prefer the word enigma or paradox.

Jon: The wisdom of Ecclesiastes, the second book in our wisdom series. Let's go.

[00:02:15]

Jon: Okay. So Ecclesiastes. Let's first tee this up. Let's refresh on Proverbs so we can compare the wisdom of the Proverbs to the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. Proverbs is this nice kind of clean worldview, which is, be wise, fear the Lord and things are going to go well.

Tim: Things are very likely to go well. So much so that Lady wisdom or the father figure in Proverbs can say, "Trust the Lord with all your heart. Don't lean on your own understanding. Be wise. Fear the Lord, and it will be held to your bones and your barns will be full of crops, that you'll live long days and have a big family."

Not Another Proverbs

Jon: That sounds great.

Tim: Who doesn't want that?

Jon: Do the right thing and things will work out for you. Which, by the way, is the worldview I grew up in. Like, there's a right and wrong decision at any moment, do the right thing and things will go well for you.

Tim: Proverbs has a really valuable contribution to the Bible's wisdom literature. We can probably all from our own life experience validate that when we make wise decisions, they usually go better.

Jon: It's wise to be wise

Tim: It's wise to be wise. That's kind of self-evident after you've lived for a little while.

Jon: But then we get to the book of Ecclesiastes and there's this massive turn here. It put some brakes on Proverbs.

Tim: Yeah. And it may be that there are some cynics or skeptics when they are listening to the Proverbs saying, "Well, okay, I get it." And sure, that's true a lot of the time, but it's not necessarily true all the time. I remember that time I saved up and then the stock market crashed. Or I remember—

Jon: I made all the right decision.

Tim: Yeah, I did all the right things.

Jon: My CPA gave me a checklist, and I did it all.

Tim: Yeah, sure.

Jon: Or my tax advisor.

Tim: "I worked hard and saved up and went to college, put in my years, and I got this degree, and I can't get hired anywhere. What's up with that?"

Jon: The wise thing doesn't always work out. And part of that is because it's hard to know exactly what the wisest thing always is. It's a conventional wisdom go to college, save for retirement, whatever. But then in the Proverbs, there's wisdom that should be universal, that you should be able to depend on. But even with that stuff...

Tim: Yes, that's right. I was always honest at work.

Jon: I was supposed to be honest.

Not Another Proverbs

Tim: To be honest, that's part of hearing God. So I'm always honest at work, and you know what? I lost it."

Jon: It reminds me I was looking at Starbucks and I was applying to be a shift manager. And so, I was meeting with the district manager and the manager of my store getting interviewed. The last question was, "Give me an example of a time that you made a wrong decision on the job."

The first thing that came to mind was the day before we're closing up, and you're supposed to clean the bathrooms, and this is whole list of things to do. And there's always like three people cleaning up. So I went to go to the bathroom right before we're going to leave, and the bathroom's mess. So the girl who was supposed to do it didn't do it. And I was like, "Well, who cares? And then we left.

And so, I'm sitting here across the District Manager, and she's asking me when I made a mistake, and I said, "Oh, well, a couple days ago." She looks at me and she goes, "You did what?" She was shocked. "I can't believe you didn't fix that." And then I was like, "Oh, no, I'm not going to get this job."

Tim: It makes me think of I was recently talking to a friend who works in home real estate here in Portland, which is a really hot market right now. She was saying she quit at one company and moved to another. Basically, she just said, "I wasn't cooking the numbers on listings and listing houses for more than what they're worth or less than what they're worth, or changing the number of rooms and so on, just to get people in the house."

Jon: Oh, and they'd be like, "Oh, that was a mistake."

Tim: Yeah, totally. But all of her coworkers that's just what you do. You change the data on the real estate listing to get people into the house. And she wasn't getting promoted, she wasn't getting as much business or sales, so she actually had to quit. There was an example of someone who lost out because they were fearing more and not—

Jon: That's better because actually I got the job.

Tim: It's just two examples to say, you try and do the right thing and sometimes it does work out, sometimes it doesn't. Proverbs doesn't seem to account for that glitch in the system. And so, Ecclesiastes is a voice among the three wisdom voices in the Hebrew Scriptures that says, "Hey, wait a minute, Proverbs, you're going too fast too soon. Do you see all of these other examples where what you're saying doesn't work out? What about those? Let's focus on those. And can we draw conclusions from them? And maybe life isn't as clean as we would like to think."

Not Another Proverbs

Jon: Ecclesiastes doesn't do it in like...it goes for the juggler. It's like, "Let's throw down."

Tim: "Proverbs you've overreached."

Jon: That's fascinating. So your comment earlier was, "Hey, this books in the Bible isn't that funny. So like, tell me about that." The way that it goes for the juggler and the way that it kind of deconstruct so many things, it feels very different than most other books.

Tim: Yeah, it is. It has a different feel. There's no other book like it where you have this first-person voice, who's telling you about a lifetime's worth of experiment. The book stage is a big experiment where "I tried this and I went and learned about this and then here's what I concluded." Whereas proverbs receive the wisdom of the ages from generations past that we talked about. But Ecclesiastes is basing his conclusions on experimentation. Innovating new ideas based off of experiment.

My doctoral advisor Michael Fox at the University of Wisconsin — he's retired now — but he is a Jewish scholar. He was in his late 60's when I was with him for about four years working closely with him. He wrote commentaries on all the wisdom books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. His most brilliant one was on Ecclesiastes days.

And his way is framing it is for Proverbs you know it's true because it's ancient and old and it has been tested. And Ecclesiastes innovate in the biblical tradition because he says, "You know it's true because you've tested and an examined it here in the present." And he thinks in the wisdom books it marks a new point of maybe just because it's old doesn't mean it's true. And that that's unique. In the Bible, there's not many other books that say something like that.

Jon: Right. Well, and then also, it deconstructs a lot. It's all it's asking a lot of questions and doesn't have simple answers, which that seems different than most of the books.

Tim: Yeah, it is. Yeah, the teacher he's relentless in taking apart simple, black and white views of God and uses the world and how life ought to work.

The teacher's voice that makes up most of the book is not the author's voice. The author of the book speaks in the first line introducing us to the teacher.

Jon: It was one line.

Tim: Yeah, in chapter 1:1. And then chapter 1:2, the teacher takes over until nearly the end of chapter 12. But the last paragraph of the book is not from the teacher we've

Not Another Proverbs

been hearing. It's from the author. The author says positive things about what you just heard from the teacher, but he also warns you—

Jon: He critiques the criticism.

Tim: He critiques the criticism. And then the author's conclusion at the end sounds like Moses: Fear God, obey the laws of the Torah.

Jon: It's a little bit more in line with the narrative so far.

Tim: You could call it biblical orthodoxy or something. To me, that's absolutely fascinating that this biblical author who's anonymous wants us to hear at length this very critical, skeptical voice, and is willing even to—

Jon: Let them go for...

[crosstalk 00:11:21]

Tim: Yeah. And at the end wants to say, "Now, let's bring this in line with the larger biblical theology but you really need to hear what this guy has to say." It's a way of hedging a little bit on the teacher and saying, "You know, don't take this too far. You can read books all your life and think them even and you won't get anywhere. It'll just exhaust you." So don't take these words too far but let them bother you and stick in your mind so that you aren't shattered when your life doesn't work out for you. So interesting.

That brings us to, who is the teacher? The author's intro just says he was a king in Jerusalem and a descendant from the line of David. Which makes you think, "Okay, Solomon is the wise man?" And traditionally, this book has in Jewish and Christian tradition been connected to Solomon and his old age, because he's old and wise, and he's done a lot and seen a lot.

But there are some problems with that. One is that Solomon in his old age was the prostate and had hundreds of wives and political alliances, and worshiped all kinds of other gods. And this seems very unlikely to come from the Solomon of his old age.

Jon: Why would you imagine Solomon having written in his old age?

Tim: I mean, the biblical depiction is that his allegiance was given to many gods now, in addition to Yahweh, the God of Israel. I've never quite had that question put to me in that way. I don't know off the top of my head. I actually need to think about that question a little more. But it raises what's very interesting.

Not Another Proverbs

The book of Proverbs, it began saying, "The Proverbs of Solomon." And it goes on to give you a bunch of speeches from an anonymous father to son, and then from Lady Wisdom. Then you get to click collections of Proverbs, most of which have, again, the heading proverbs of Solomon. But the last number of chapters have new headings that just say, "These are proverbs that come from the wise ones, or from Agur or from Lemuel, what his mom taught him.

And so, you have a book that's titled and connected to Solomon, but it tells you in the book itself that not all of this comes from Solomon. Here we have another book that gives you a hint of a royal Solomon like persona but it never says that in the book. It never says Solomon in the book.

And so, you can say, "Well, it just assumes it's Solomon" or you can say, "No, there's something more happening here." It's conspicuous by its absence that the book doesn't say, "Solomon." It just says, "A king in Jerusalem from long ago." Which raises the possibility, is this a later King or are we almost creating like an icon of the wise voice, the father of the wisdom tradition? But it doesn't necessarily mean that it was historically written by Solomon himself. Because we know the teacher is not the same as the author of the book.

Jon: So the author somehow came across these writings that he knew came from a king that was the son of David. And by that, that could literally mean there was a king, it could have been Solomon, it could have been another one of the sons of David that was king at some point, but he wrote this, and the author compiled it, or it could mean in the tradition of the wisdom of the kings.

Tim: Similar to the Song of Songs, which says of Solomon, but that doesn't necessarily mean it was written by Solomon. In fact, there are lots of good reasons that it most likely wasn't written by Solomon.

Jon: And so he just was using the kingship kind of regardless of how this was actually written? I mean, that's a possibility.

Tim: Yeah, yeah. It would be an anonymous teacher in Jerusalem or Israel writing in the tradition of Solomon and writing from his persona. There's an Old Testament scholar named Tremper Longman who did his whole dissertation, it's published now, on this. It's something like Acadian Royal Autobiographies or something like that. Acadian is a language that's a cousin language to Hebrew.

But he was studying in ancient Babylon. This was a genre of writing. From the king's court, there would be hired a scribe or a wise teacher to write a book in the first person as if it's from the king's perspective. And so this was a type of book that

Not Another Proverbs

people wrote in ancient world, and it fits precisely what we see in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Jon: So the author gets this, kind of regardless of who wrote it, it's presented as this is the words of the son of David—

Tim: The words from the Royal wisdom tradition in Israel. It's also funny, there's another small detail that I've always thought was interesting. In chapter 1:16, the teacher says to himself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled in Jerusalem ever before me. Out of all the rulers of Jerusalem ever before me." And you're like, "Oh, well, my dad."

Jon: Sorry dad. It's Saul.

Tim: Well, but he didn't rule in Jerusalem. Because David made Jerusalem the temple.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: We could be wrong about this. It could come from Solomon. I just think there are reasons that make it—Jon: It's okay if someone comes and says, "Probably is or isn't Solomon, you don't have to freak out and go for my worldview of understanding the Bible.

Tim: If you really get into the book itself, you realize that tying this to one specific person as the author, it doesn't matter for the interpretation of the book really. You just get into the words and interpret the words that come from the Royal wisdom tradition of David.

[00:17:51]

Tim: Here's how the book begins. "The words of the teacher, son of David King and Jerusalem." That's the author speaking to us. And then the author summarizes everything the teacher has to say in just one line.

Jon: This is kind of like when the keynote speaker is being introduced.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: It's just a quick little—

Tim: It's like the emcee of your room introduces the speaker and then says, "Here's his main idea." Right off the bat, we face a translation problem. So in the New International Version, the author's summary is meaningless. Meaningless is what the

Not Another Proverbs

teacher says. Utterly meaningless. Everything's meaningless. But if I turn to the New American Standard Version—

Jon: What was that version? Was that NIV?

Tim: That was a New International Version, NIV, yeah. If I turned to the New American Standard, and as I read, "Vanity of vanities, everything is vanity."

Jon: So, meaningless to me, there's no meaning, so there's no reason behind any of that.

Tim: Yes. "I have surveyed and here's my authoritative conclusion. There is no meaning."

Jon: There is no meaning. And then vanity seems to be like all of this is just an exercise in futility. I don't know actually. I haven't thought about vanity much. I never use that word.

Tim: That's exactly right. I think that's the problem. In modern English, the way we speak it in 2016, the word vanity has two main meanings. It means self-exaltation and pride or it's a little table you sit at to put on cosmetic.

Jon: Which then speaks to hearing how you look.

Tim: That self-focus.

Jon: And life is self-focused.

Tim: Right. Which is not at all what is meant here. And part of that is the translation vanity comes from the King James from English 400 years ago.

Jon: Yeah, he's using words a little different.

Tim: Yeah. So the meaning of the English word is changed. I think both of those translations get added aspect of what the teacher is trying to say. I always hate to do this because I never want to erode people's confidence in English translations, because they're great. But there are cases where they're translations and they can't fully communicate it everything that the Hebrew author wants to communicate. And this is one of those times where

Jon: It would be a really interesting podcast is figuring out the history of why these were translated this way. I don't know. I just got really interested in it.

Tim: Well, for English that always goes back to Tyndale. And then Tyndale had influence over what was called the Geneva Bible, and then the King James.

Not Another Proverbs

Jon: Okay. But there's got to be a story of that moment where they're like looking at this Hebrew word and then making a decision. Because they know what the word is and you're about to tell us what the Hebrew word is more literally, so they must have been wrestling with that.

Tim: Yeah, for sure they did. But also, and this is not to be prideful or anything, but their understanding of Hebrew was 500 years old. And—

Jon: Wasn't as complete.

Tim: Yeah. The study of ancient Hebrew over the last half millennia, I mean, has progressed enormously just like our understanding of science and the universe has progressed.

Jon: Because at that point, Hebrew wasn't a spoken language at all.

Tim: It wasn't spoken anymore as biblical Hebrew and the wealth of ancient Hebrew text and cousin languages in Hebrew hadn't been discovered and studied yet. So we have a better understanding of Hebrew than we did 400 years ago, and a lot of the translation differences that happened in modern translations are based on more recent scholarships.

Jon: So Tyndale, he's reading this, he's going to make a decision, and he goes with vanity, which back then we don't even know what—

Tim: Well, yeah, the English word vanity, I think essentially means what meaningless does in modern English.

Jon: Oh, really? Okay, let's see.

Tim: You tell me.

Jon: Futile or worthless from Old French *vanite*, self-conceit, utility, lack of resolve. From Latin, *vanitatem* [SP], emptiness, aimlessness, falsity. But then figuratively, it became about foolishness and pride. So even back then, it kind of had that sense.

Tim: Both of those. So I would humbly suggest that we just go back to the source.

Jon: Yeah, go to the Hebrew.

Tim: Yeah, good to the Hebrew word. The Hebrew word's simple to say. It's not hard to pronounce. Hevel. H-E...It's technically the letter B of the Hebrew alphabet but pronounces like a V. So hevel. And its most basic meaning is smoke or vapor. In Psalm 144, the poet says, "Lord, what are human beings that you care about them?"

Not Another Proverbs

They are like hevel; their days are like a fleeting shadow." So the idea is human beings here today, gone tomorrow; they're like a wisp of smoke.

And then the next line, they're like a fleeting shadow. So the shadow moves from the morning down all the way across and then it's gone. When the sun sets your shadow disappears. The point is fleeting, temporary, but it's smoke. That it's a wisp of smoke that you see it and then it's gone. So that's just most basic meaning of hevel is a wisp of smoke or vapor.

Jon: Or shadow.

Tim: Shadow is in Psalm 144, it's the next poetic line, which uses a different word and different metaphor. But the point is that its most basic meaning it's a wisp of smoke that's temporary. Here and it looks solid. You're like, "Oh, there it is. That's smoke" and then, gone.

Jon: Do you think back then it also then meant figuratively would be another good word like futile.

Tim: Well, we'll get there. That's where the teacher's going to apply this word and bring out a nuance of their meaning that is not very common but it's going to be one of the main meanings in the book.

Jon: Like is this very poetic? At this point, are people going to be like, "Well, I've never really thought of that the lifelike hevel or is that going to already become part of..."

[00:24:54]

Tim: No, it's very common. Job chapter 7 he says, "I despise my life, my suffering I wish I wasn't alive. My days are like hevel." The Psalm says, "As slaves and the poor their lives are like hevel in the world." Isaiah 57, "Idols." This is actually in Isaiah and in Jeremiah. Their word to describe idol statues is hevel.

So there it's not necessarily that they're temporary, but they seem to be solid and offer you something real. Like, you prayed your idol and then nothing happens.

Jon: I love that metaphor. I love that image. We don't have anything quite like it. Do we know?

Tim: No. Well, I mean, vapor?

Jon: I think I understand now more meaningless it's there because it's like you think there's meaning there, you think there's something of substance there, but then it goes away.

Not Another Proverbs

Tim: Yes. I think any word in any language can have different nuances of meaning. So at its most basic, it means temporary or fleeting. Like in the verses we just read of its here today, the slave and the poor person or my life, I'm a mortal human.

In chapter 11 of Ecclesiastes is a poem about death and a long one. And so, in chapter 11:8, the teacher says, "Listen, however, many years somebody is going to live, you should enjoy them. Because you should remember the days of darkness, they're coming and everything to come is hevel."

The point is you're young and you're youthful, and your body works great, but remember, it's hevel, it's here today, gone tomorrow because the days of darkness are coming. So your youth and energy and health, it's fleeting, it's hevel. It doesn't mean it's meaningless, it means you it's not going to be around forever. It's going to be here and then...

Jon: And whether or not you think there's meaning in that is another question.

Tim: Correct? It's only about time. The time factor. Here today, gone tomorrow.

Jon: Got it.

Tim: Your youth, your health, your life.

Jon: But if you're talking about an idol, and you're calling it hevel, then you would go, "Oh, so there's no meaning in that idol?"

Tim: Yes, yeah, yeah. This is what I would call the second nuance that the teacher taps into when he uses the word hevel. He uses the word 38 times in this short 12-chapter book. He's using it constantly. And most of the times, he doesn't use it to me and fleeting or temporary. He uses it to mean the way my Michael Fox, my doctoral advisor, he thought the best English word to capture it is absurd. Or I've come to prefer the word Enigma or paradox.

So here's a couple of examples.

Jon: Wait a second. Sorry. You just went to great lengths to say hevel means like vapor or something that doesn't last. And now you're saying in this book, it actually is more talking about another aspect of it, which is not whether it last but whether it makes sense.

Tim: Well, the teacher's a brilliant wordsmith. He's using a word that's capable of a couple of different nuances of meaning. Sometimes he'll use it to mean fleeting or temporary. In chapter 11, you're young, you have youth, but the days of darkness

Not Another Proverbs

are coming, your life's hevel. But he doesn't bring out that temporary nuance of the word in all of those 38 uses. In fact, that's a minority of how he uses the word.

The majority of the times he uses the word he means something different if you read the word in context.

Jon: Give me an example.

Tim: So chapter 6:1. "God allows some people to have wealth and possessions and honor so that they lack nothing that their heart's desire, but God doesn't always grant them the ability to enjoy them, and then one day some stranger is going to enjoy them instead. This is hevel.

Or chapter 8:14. "Here's something hevel that occurs in the land: righteous people get wicked people deserve and wicked people get what righteous people deserve. This, I say, is hevel." What he doesn't mean is temporary. He actually means the opposite. He's saying, this is happening all the time.

Jon: This is a reality.

Tim: This is a reality that's ongoing and constant.

Jon: But it's a reality that he wants to use the same word, which means vapor, smoke so there's a disorientingness to it.

Tim: Here's my way of saying it is, it's similar to the idols. Smoke is real. Like when you see it, a cloud of smoke, you look at it and go, "Oh, that's a thing. Look at it. I can see it. I can point at it just like I can point to a rock or a door. And so that's a thing. But smoke has this unique quality that when I reach out my hands to grab onto it, there's nothing there. When I reach out to grab a rock, it's solid, it's there.

Jon: Kind of like when you're looking at fog. Like if you're above the fog line, you're looking at it, it looks like this nice big blanket.

Tim: Yeah, clouds. Clouds.

Jon: Like clouds.

Tim: Like when your kid, you look up at the clouds and you wish you could go lay on one them.

Jon: Or you're above the clouds, you look down on a plane and it looks like really soft. But then when you're in the fog driving around, it just looks like a haze.

Not Another Proverbs

Tim: That's right. Hevel.

Jon: It's hevel.

Tim: Hevel. So, here I am living my life, and I work at a real estate company, and it seems like telling the truth ought to bring me success because it's the right thing to do. And that's justice. And that's good. And I can count on it, is real. We're not making up justice. We all want it to happen.

Jon: We want everyone else to be honest with us.

Tim: Yeah, totally. And we all know what justice looks like when we see it happen. It's the right thing. But then I go out and I do the right thing and I'm punished for it, and I lose out. It's hevel. What he doesn't mean is, therefore, everything's meaningless.

What he means is, I don't get that. It seems like justice is real. We can all know it. But sometimes when justice is done, good things don't happen, bad things happen. That's hevel.

That's why I think the word absurd, or enigma or paradox. Because what the teacher isn't saying is, "I know all the answers, and I declare to you that life is meaningless." What he's saying is, I've discovered there's a glitch in the system. And things that I thought were certain and true, aren't always certain and true. And that's the definition of paradox. It's not contradiction.

Jon: Well, now, couldn't he have used a word that more literally means riddle or paradox or Enigma? I mean, there's got to be another Hebrew word.

Tim: Sure. But he chose this image and metaphor that I think once you get it—

Jon: So instead of using maybe a more straightforward word like absurd—

Tim: Logic oriented term.

Jon: Yeah, logic oriented. He decided, "Well, we're running with this word hevel, typically it means smoke or vapor but sometimes poetically it can mean—

Tim: Temporary. My life is hevel, here today and gone tomorrow.

Jon: "But I'm going to take that language and now I'm going to push it further and say the wisdom of the Proverbs has hevel to it because it doesn't always seem to work out. And so now let's live in this metaphor. And like, in the same way that that idol when you reach out and it just dissipates, even when you reach out and try to do the right thing, and fear God and all this stuff, there's still that sense to it as well. And it's

Not Another Proverbs

disorienting. You're in the fog and you don't have the answers, it's not clear why. It's confusing. It's hevel.

Tim: Yeah, it's hevel. He's using an existing word that has this possibility of nuance of meaning of it's not real, or it doesn't work out, and then he pushes it.

Jon: Well, poets do this all the time.

Tim: Poets do this all the time. They'll use the word but in a different way and context.

Jon: And then if it becomes a popular poem or a popular thought, then it just becomes part of the vernacular. People use that word that way. So I'm curious, like, "Did he do this or was this word already used this way and he's just running with it?"

Tim: That's a complex question about the development of word meanings, and so on. What we can see is in the Prophet, this idea of high hevel as not temporary but as seeming real, but then just an illusion is they use the word hevel to apply that idea to idols. And the teacher is using that nuance of hevel and applying it to all of life and wisdom and righteousness.

[00:35:09]

Jon: Isn't this really scandalous, though, for Jewish point of view, in which it's like God said, "Here's what I promise you," and He will do it as long as you uphold your end of the bargain?" And so that's like, keeping the commandments.

And then this wisdom of the Proverbs runs with that and says, "Yeah, in fact, you can apply God's wisdom to all these areas in life, and things go well for you." And so, you know when things aren't going well, it's because you've been making a mistake, and you haven't been holding up your end of the bargain. But then you get this book and like turns out on its head.

Tim: Well, that's true but it's not scandalous maybe the way it is to modern Christians from a certain background. In many ways, it's very Jewish.

Jon: But it wouldn't have been scandalous to a [Jew].

Tim: A better way to say that is, the Bible contains within itself these words and a story from God, but then the Hebrew Bible specifically has also within itself the human response to that. So the book of Psalms is prayers, for the most part, people's words to God, some of them, thanking God for His awesomeness and what he does, and then a whole bunch of them are saying, like, "Wait a minute, this isn't working out. What's happening? God, I'm angry. Dang it. Why don't you do something?" So that's

Not Another Proverbs

the whole part of the Bible is people getting angry at God and venting their emotion.

And so, here is another example of within God's Word to his people, is a human voice saying, "Wait a minute. It doesn't always work out the way Proverbs said it would and that human word becomes part of God's Word to his people."

And so within Jewish culture, Jewish culture as it goes on throughout history really has always contained well, I think this dialogue and tension or perspectives. It's contained within the Bible itself.

Jon: That continues on in the tradition there?

Tim: Yeah. So the Mishnah and Talmud, these are discussions about how to live out the laws of the Torah, but it'll be a whole chapter on how to obey the Sabbath. And the chapter just contains the perspective of 18 different rabbis and doesn't tell you what to conclude. It just gives you the perspective of 18 different...

Jon: That's very Jewish thing is go, "Wow," for the tension within your tradition?

Tim: The book of Ecclesiastes does that so well with the two voices. Because the author says, "Listen, the words of this teacher, but listen, he's going to give an orthodox conclusion to it."

Jon: And then there's me as like a modern Western Christian who goes, "Wait a second. How can this be in the Bible?" Because that's not from my tradition.

I never went to church, and one guy gets up, and he's like, "Hey, so here's how to follow Jesus and here's what you should think about this thing going on in the world right now." And then another guy gets up and goes, "Cool. That was nice, but I think following Jesus means this and this is how you should think about this current event." And then you go away from that service going, "Okay, what do I do?" That never happens. That never ever happens. Like Ecclesiastes, he's has this like sense to it of like, what do I do with this?

Tim: What you do with it is you listen to it, then you go listen to Job and then you have three different perspectives on how to live well in God's good world. And hopefully, you've listened to all of them, honestly, with an open mind, and you will be a wiser, better human if you take all three of them seriously. I think that's the point. Stereo is two things coming at you right?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So what's three things?

Not Another Proverbs

Jon: Dolby Surround Sound

Tim: Dolby Surround Sound. The wisdom books are Dolby Surround Sound.

Jon: Yeah, that's a good image. That's just different. It's very different and it makes me think of Scripture differently. I think I come from, "Well, let's boil it down to a systematic theology, which is like the book that gives you the answers."

And the way that you're saying the wisdom literature, in particular, written is "I'm going to give you three different books with three different points of view and that's the answer for you." The answer is you living in tension between all three of these books.

Tim: And they don't contradict each other. They complement each other. Because Proverbs actually never said this is airtight and how it'll always work.

Jon: It kind of feels that way. You read it and you walk away and you feel that way. Sure.

Tim: Sure. However, it's a book of Proverbs. The form of the book itself is a proverb. As I said, it's proverbs, not the book of promises. And so Ecclesiastes comes along and says, "It's not airtight and here's a whole bunch of examples. And how do you reckon and live with that?"

The teacher's conclusion isn't, "Therefore, go be a relativist or hedonist." He's actually still going to say it's better to be wise and fear God, but you should adjust your expectations so that your worldview isn't shattered when horrible things happen to you for doing the right thing. That's the significant point of why I think meaningless is not a helpful translation because meaningless makes you think, "Oh, here's the authoritative conclusion, there is no meaning." And that's not what he's saying.

What he's saying is Enigma, there are some things that happen in life that are just a true glitch in the system and you don't know why.

Jon: You're not going to be able to figure it out.

Tim: You're not going to be able to figure it out.

Jon: Which it's related then to what God says to Job.

Tim: Very similar to Job, except it with Job we are given a window into the heavens and a bit more understanding of why something happens to somebody, even though we don't actually really get the full answer.

Not Another Proverbs

Jon: Even though it still leaves you with a ton of questions.

Tim: Yeah. We'll talk about that when we get a Job. But Ecclesiastes is just saying, "The system doesn't always work perfectly - the wisdom fear of the Lord system, and you're not going to be able to figure it out. It's hevel. It's real, but it's also not always real in particular circumstances."

Jon: There's a kind of a agnosticism about it in some ways. Not in that he doesn't say there's no God or that there's thing. But he's saying there's plenty that we can't know. And that's okay.

Tim: Yeah, there's going to be plenty that you can't know. Listen, we're just at verse 2 of the book. So that's not where he ends. That's where he began. Because he's going to have a lot of recommendations about how you deal with that and how you live well in God's world even knowing that things are hevel.

[00:42:50]

Jon: Can we talked about this first example? I think it's a little interesting.

Tim: The first example?

Jon: The paradox. God gives some people wealth, possessions and honor so that they lack nothing their heart's desire. First of all, that sounds amazing. Everything my heart desires, I get - wealth, possessions, honor. I'm just stoked. God give that to some people.

Tim: Yeah, yeah. They get all that they wish and wanted.

Jon: Which is, I think what everyone really is kind of longing for. They are longing for, I just want to have the stuff I need, I want to have people respect me, I want to be taken care of because my heart is always longing for things. And if I had the stuff then my heart would be satiated. And God has given that to some people. Is that what he's saying? Is this just a thought experiment?

Tim: But the sentence goes on.

Jon: Well, the sentence goes on, but can we just stop right there?

Tim: Oh, yeah.

Jon: If you're a king you kind of have that in a sense. Everything you would need, everyone is supposed to respect to you. Like if you're a celebrity, you get that.

Not Another Proverbs

- Tim: I think he's playing into perception here. That's not the end of the sentence. He plays into perception that some people have wealth, possession, honor and everything they want, they get. This actually is chapter 6. It's a culmination of a line of thought that started and back in chapter 2, is that even people who get those things paradoxically hate their lives.
- Jon: Which is so true a lot of the times.
- Tim: And all that they had to go through to acquire all of that stuff, by the time they have it all, they're stressed out and can't sleep at night and old and exhausted. So he finishes and says, "They lack nothing their heart's desire but those are the same people usually that God hasn't granted inability to enjoy them because they had to kill themselves to get all this." And then they die and all of their wealth goes on to irresponsible trust fund kids or whatever like on to somebody else and strangers get to benefit from everything that they worked for. But the person who worked for it dies because of all sorts of things.
- Jon: Or even when they're alive, it's other people get to enjoy the things that they've accomplished.
- Tim: So he says, "Here's an example where somebody worked hard, feared the Lord, was wise, got all this stuff, they lack nothing their heart's desire but their life actually became miserable to them through acquiring all of that. And then they didn't even truly get to enjoy it, other people enjoy it. It's hevel. It's hevel. It's like somebody lived by Proverbs 3, like trust I trust the Lord—
- Jon: You told me a story about that. Someone that we know who got really famous, got all this money, like he was upright dude and just was killing it. He just writing books and whatever. And then he tells me like he's actually really, really depressed and it's like is now addicted to whatever and now blah, blah. It'd be like, "Oh my goodness. What a bummer? Why? It really is gut-wrenching to know that like, "Man, you had it, and then you wouldn't gamble this way, you went and did that—
- Tim: Or you just weren't able to enjoy it because of—
- Jon: You're just depressed?
- Tim: Yeah, the mindset that you're accomplishment.
- Jon: And then it'd be frustrating. It'd be like, "Why does it have to be that way?" And there wouldn't be a clear answer.

Not Another Proverbs

Tim: Yes. Wealth, possessions, honor, those are the very things that proverb said you would get by living wise and fearing the Lord. And you've got them and you hate your life.

Jon: And you can't enjoy it.

Tim: It's hevel. Again, it's not meaningless. That's a paradox. That's not how the system is supposed to work. Jon: It's a troubling kind of glitch that Proverbs didn't expose.

Tim: And notice, he begins, he says, "God's give some people this." So this is how it works out sometimes. Some people have wealth, possessions, honor, and it's great. They have big families, and they're happy and die at a ripe old age. But not everybody.

So again, Proverbs doesn't give you the exceptions to the rule. Ecclesiastes comes and says, let's talk about those exemptions because they expose that things aren't as black and white as you thought. They're hevel. It's a paradox, which is different than a contradiction.

I think you hear meaningless, you say, "Oh, it's a contradiction, life has no meaning."

Jon: Well, it's a contradiction in the biblical worldview where life has meaning because God created it with purpose. So there's meaning to life.

Tim: But a contradiction means I know because I've surveyed all the data and know this is a genuine contradiction in the world.

Jon: These can exist together.

Tim: Right. And that's different than paradox. Paradox is saying, from my vantage point, with the limited data and perspective I have, I can't see how these two things go together. It doesn't mean they're not reconcilable. It just means I can't reconcile them. But I'm not God. I think that's what the teachers trying to say.

"From here under the sun," which is a phrase he uses 28 times here, humans who are not transcendent and above all, we look at life and what we see is paradox. Sometimes.

Jon: From our vantage point under this sun, we can't discern why these things are happening.

Tim: Just because I can't see meaning in something that happens in my life doesn't mean there isn't meaning. It just means I don't have the perspective to see what it is.

Jon: And you might never have that perspective.

Not Another Proverbs

Tim: And you most likely will never have that perspective. Like Job never got that perspective. And like the teacher. The book is not trying to make you into an atheist, the book's trying to make you a humble theist, a humble fear of God to know that you should fear God, keep His commandments as the author says at the end, but don't expect that everything's always going to work out for you. Tragedies will happen, things won't work out. And it doesn't mean that God's not good. It just means that life is full of paradoxes under the sun.

And that humbles you, and then that force you to say, "What are my motives for pursuing the good life if there's so much hevel?"

Jon: That's the end of part one in our conversation of Ecclesiastes. In the next episode we'll continue this conversation and we'll dive into the specific arguments that the teacher makes to prove that the world is in fact hevel.

We make videos and we put them on YouTube. This conversation is going to be turned into a short animated video that explains the wisdom of Ecclesiastes and it will be out in the summer of 2016. We also have out an animated overview of Proverbs. We really love it. It came out beautifully. Then we'll finish off that series with an overview of Job. That will come out in the fall.

We also have a lot of other videos we have outlines of every book of the Bible in read scripture series. Those are all on YouTube. You can find them at youtube.com/thebibleproject. You could download them for free off of our website, use them in church, school, home with your families, any way that you want to use them. We're on twitter, @JoinBibleProj and on Facebook, facebook.com/thebibleproject. Say hi to us. We'll catch you next time. Thanks for being a part of this with us.