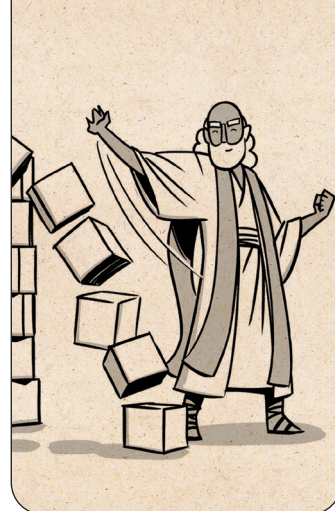




Ecclesiastes

Video Transcript

Introduction

00:00-01:16

The book of Ecclesiastes. It's part of the Bible's wisdom literature, and it opens with this line, "The words of Qohelet, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." Now, in Hebrew, the word *qohelet* means someone who has gathered people together, and in this case, it's to learn, so it's often translated in English as "teacher." And the teacher is said to be a son or descendant of King David, and so there are different views about who this figure might have been.

Many think that it refers to King Solomon, others to maybe one of the later kings of David's line, and still others think that it's actually a later Israelite teacher who has adopted a Solomon-like persona as a teaching aid. Whichever of these views is correct, the key thing is to recognize that the teacher is a character in the book and is different than the author of the book, who remains anonymous.

So we do hear the teacher's voice for most of the book, but it's actually a different voice—the author—who introduces us to the teacher in the first sentence and then, at the end, concludes the book by summarizing and evaluating everything the teacher just said. So the author is someone who wants us to hear all that the teacher has to say and then help us process it and form our own conclusion.

Chapters 1-12

01:17-06:33

So what does the teacher have to say? Well the author summarizes the teacher's basic message at the beginning and right at the end, and it's, "*Hevel, hevel*, everything is utterly *hevel*."

Now, most English Bibles translate this word *hevel* as "meaningless," but that doesn't quite capture the heart of that idea. In Hebrew, *hevel* literally means "vapor" or "smoke," and the teacher uses this word 38 times in the book as a metaphor to

describe how life is, first of all, temporary or fleeting, like a wisp of smoke, but secondly, also how life is an enigma or a paradox. Like smoke, it appears solid, but when you try and grab onto it, there's nothing there.

So there's so much beauty or goodness in the world, but just when you are enjoying it, tragedy strikes, and it all seems to blow away. Or we all have a strong sense of justice, but all of the time, bad things happen to good people. So life is constantly—it's unpredictable, it's unstable, or in the teacher's words, like chasing after the wind—*hevel*.

Now, that's kind of a downer, so why is he saying all of this? The author's basic goal is to target all of the ways that we try to build meaning and purpose in our lives apart from God, and he lets the teacher deconstruct these. So the author thinks we spend most of our time investing energy and emotion in things that ultimately have no lasting meaning or significance, and he lets the teacher give us a hard lesson in reality.

You can see this most clearly in the opening and closing poems, which focus first of all on time and then on death. So the teacher says, "You can spend your whole life working and achieving because you think that makes your life meaningful. You should really stop and consider the march of time." For all of the human effort that takes place in the world, nothing really ever changes.

So sure, we develop technology, and we build nations that rise and fall, but go climb a mountain and see if it cares. It was there long before any of us, and it will be here long after. I mean, no one is even going to remember you or anything you did a hundred years from now, but that mountain? It'll still be there. And the ocean will still be breaking on the beach, and the sun will still rise and set. And so time will eventually erase you and me and everything that we care about.

And if that's not disheartening enough, the teacher also can't stop talking about death all the way through the book, but especially in this poem near the end. He says, "Death is the great equalizer, and it renders meaningless most of our daily activities. It devours the wise and the fool, the rich and the poor. No matter who you are, what you've done, good or bad, we are all going to die, and it's inescapable."

So with these two ideas in hand, the teacher goes on to consider all the activities and false hopes that we invest our lives in to find meaning and significance, like wealth or career or social status or pleasure. So you think working hard is going to make life worth it? Think about the stress and the toll that that takes on you, all the anxiety and the sleepless nights. And by the time you actually earn some wealth, you're going to be too old to enjoy it anyway. And then by the time that you have to pass it on to someone, they may not even be someone who cares about anything

that you did. Or maybe you think pleasure is going to make life worth it for you? Go for it! You know, live for your vacations, live for the weekend party—Monday always comes. “*Hevel, hevel, everything is utterly hevel.*”

So what does the teacher advocate then? That we become pure hedonists or relativists? Well, no. That would be *hevel* too. The teacher acknowledges the ideas from Proverbs, that living by wisdom and the fear of the Lord, that these have real advantages. On the whole, life will probably go better for you.

See, but the problem is that even living by wisdom and the fear of the Lord, they’re *hevel* too because they don’t guarantee a good life. Good people die tragically, and horrible people live long and prosper. There’s just too many exceptions. And so even wisdom is *hevel*—again, not meaningless, but an enigma. Wisdom doesn’t work the way you think it should all of the time.

So what’s the way forward in the midst of all this *hevel*? And here, paradoxically, the teacher discovers the key to the true enjoyment of life under the sun: It’s accepting *hevel*. It’s acknowledging that everything in your life is totally out of your control.

About six different times, at some of the bleakest moments in his monologue, the teacher talks about the gift of God, which is the enjoyment of simple, good things in life, like friendship or family, a good meal or a sunny day. You can’t control these things, you’re certainly not guaranteed them, but that’s their beauty. When I come to adopt a posture of total trust in God, it frees me to simply enjoy my life as I actually experience it, not as I think it ought to be, because even my expectations about what life ought to be are ultimately *hevel*.

Hevel, everything under the sun is utterly hevel. And so the teacher’s words come to a close.

Chapters 12-14

06:34-07:23

Right here at the end, the author speaks up again, and he brings it all to a conclusion. He says, “The teacher’s words are very important for us to hear.” He likens them to a shepherd’s staff with a goad, a pointy end, which might hurt when it pokes you, but he says the teacher is trying to poke you to get you to move in the right direction, towards greater wisdom.

The author then warns us that you can actually take the teacher’s words too far, and you could spend your whole life buried in books trying to answer life’s existential puzzles. “Don’t try,” he says, “you’ll never get there.”

And so instead, the author offers his own conclusion, and it’s this: “Fear God and keep his commandments. This is the whole duty of humans, for God will bring every deed into judgment, every hidden thing, whether good or evil.”

Conclusion

07:23-08:00

And so the author thinks it's good to let the teacher challenge your false hopes and remind you that time and death make most of life completely out of your control. But what gives life true meaning is the hope of God's judgment, the hope that one day God will clear away all of the *hevel* and bring true justice to our world. And it's that hope that should fuel a life of honesty and integrity before God, despite the fact that I remain puzzled by most of life's mysteries. And that's the wisdom of the book of Ecclesiastes.