
Krapf Commentary Series

The Message of Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes is focused on a single issue which is stated at the very beginning; "Vanity of vanities ... vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2). The focus on this one issue has caused many to struggle, and think that it is a depressing, difficult and repetitive book, and many avoid it.

The purpose of Ecclesiastes is to deconstruct a secularist and materialist worldview, to utterly disillusion us with the world we live in, and to introduce a worldview that is based on the fear of God as Creator. It is remarkable, and contrary to all expectations, that we can enjoy life in a fallen world, but this is only possible when we recognise its place in the purposes of the sovereign Creator. This is what Ecclesiastes shows us.

This article presents some observations about the Ecclesiastes, using the framework of four questions, to get an overview of the book.

How does the author use the word vanity?

The Hebrew word "hebel" means 'a breath.' We might also translate it 'a light breeze,' 'a vapour,' or 'a puff of smoke'. Solomon uses this word hebel to describe life under the sun in three respects; what we are, what we do, and how we think.

First, this world is empty; it's like a puff of smoke (vss. 2-3; James 4:14).

Second, any pursuit of happiness in this world is fruitless; it's like "chasing the wind" 1:14,17; 2:11,17,22,26; 4:4,6,16; 6:9).

Third, any attempt to understand the world is futile; it's an enigma (3:11; 7:13; 8:17). When we try to understand the mysteries of providence, we are left with more questions (2:15,19,21,23,26).

How does the author develop his theme of Vanity?

Solomon develops the theme of the book in a most remarkable way and forces us to see how vanity is so deeply rooted in life "under the sun." We cannot escape it. There is nothing at all that is worth holding onto, not a single item, relationship or

idea. Even if we could collect the whole world and hold it in our hands, there is no profit in it (Matthew 16:26). The world is a puff of smoke. Notice how Solomon develops this theme.

First, he states the theme at the beginning and end (1:2; 12:8). This is a method that biblical writers often use which scholars call *inclusio*. It is like a set of brackets, or bookends, taking in the entire book and setting the theme.

Second, he repeats the theme of vanity throughout the book. Thirty-six times in the book, (in every chapter except chapter ten) the author uses the word "vanity" like a drumbeat setting the pace and establishing the tone of the book. The repetition of the word "vanity" is intended to instruct us, not distract us or frustrate us.

Third, the author emphasises the theme with another writing device called the superlative, "vanity of Vanities," (1:2, etc.). This is a Hebrew way of speaking which identifies something in the most extreme way. See, "servant of servants" (Genesis 9:25), "Holy of holies" (Exodus 26:33), the "chief over the chief" (Numbers 3:32), "Song of Songs" (Song of Solomon 1:1), and "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Revelation 19:16).

Fourth, the author absolutises the theme with the phrase “all is vanity” (1:14; 2:11,17; 3:1,19; 12:8).

Finally, the author itemises the theme with the frequent use (17 times) of the adverb translated “this too,” or “even this.” No matter what he looks at, or where he looks, he has to say, “even this” is vanity (1:17; 2:1,15,17,21,23,26, etc.).

How does the author highlight the human experience of vanity?

Solomon’s words, “all is vanity” describes the physical world; it is a state of being. There is a tension however between the state of the world and the human experience. Solomon develops this with the phrase “striving after wind” (KJV, “vexation of spirit”), in our English Bibles.

This phrase is a translation of two different words in Hebrew, and both of these words are found only in Ecclesiastes. The first word, re-ooth, means “to feed on” or “grasp after” (1:14; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,6; 6:9). The second word from the same root is ra-yone which means desire (1:17; 2:22; 4:16).

There is a similar phrase (with a different Hebrew word) in 5:16 where Solomon speaks of “labouring for the wind.” The prophet Hosea uses the same

word “feeding on wind” (Hosea 12:1). This expression emphasizes the reality that in all our efforts to bring something fruitful or fulfilling out of this world, or of trying to explain the mysteries of life, only aggravates the vanity, and frustrates us; it vexes, or “grieves our spirit.”

Does the author offer any hope?

Ecclesiastes gives no prophecies of Christ, and typology is not obvious and not frequent. With the heavy emphasis on the vanity of “life under the sun,” it seems at first glance that preaching the gospel from this book would be difficult.

The earth-centred worldview is very prominent, but Solomon wants us to see another world-view, one that is grounded in the fear of God (3:14; 8:12; 12:1,13). Rather than presenting the Messiah as the only hope of salvation, Solomon takes us back a step to the Creator.

Salvation is God’s initiative and God’s plan—“God sent his Son” (John 3:16). From this perspective Solomon addresses, not just the nation of Israel through whom the Messiah will come, but all the nations. He shows first, that the Creator is both entirely outside and independent of his creation (5:2) and second, that he is entirely

within and present in his creation, embedded in the consciousness of humanity (3:11). This was the approach also of Paul when he addressed the Areopagus and told them that God was not far from every one of them (Acts 17:27).

Solomon then calls us to "remember" our Creator (i.e. "keep in remembrance" or "think on," 12:1). He is not just our Creator, but is a generous provider (3:13) and also a judge (3:17), and we are to fear him (5:1-7).

With a proper view of God and faith in him, the author assures us that it is possible to find pleasure in the midst of all of the mystery (7:27-28; 8:17), frustration and toil of life and the inevitability of death. Like a goad (12:11) the words of the Preacher prick our conscience and bring us face to face with the emptiness of this world. He shatters our earthly dreams, bursts our secularist and materialist balloon, pulls the rug of earthly contentment from under us, so that we might look outside of this world for fulfillment and satisfaction.

PREACHER'S WORKSHOP

EXEGETICAL NOTES

(Notes on the text, words, and grammar)

1:3: "gain" or "profit" appears a total of ten times in the book (1:3; 2:11,13; 3:9; 5:9,16; 7:12; 10:10,11) and nowhere else in the Old Testament.

1:3: "toil" or "labour" is another important and wide-ranging word. It is found over twenty times in the book (1:3; 2:10,11,18,19, 20,21, 22,24; 3:13; 4:4,6,8,9; 5:15,18,19; 6:7; 8:15; 9:9; 10:15), and can denote anything from physical labour (Psalm 127:1), mental anguish (Psalm 25:18), or any sort of human endeavour (2:10ff; 18-23).

1:8: "satisfied" is used again later in connection with riches (4:8), money (5:10), and good things (6:3). Here it is used for the activity of the eyes in general.

Research into the life of Solomon will show the extent of Solomon's self-indulgence. 2:4-5: "houses ... vineyards" ... "gardens and parks."

- 1 Kings 9:10-13 years to build his own house, and seven years for the temple;

twenty years building in total; see 1 Kings 6:38 and 1 Kings 7:1).

- 1 Kings 7:2; 10:17–the house or armory of the forest of Lebanon
- 1 Kings 9:24—a house for the daughter of Pharaoh.
- 1 Kings 9:15, 24—the fortress on the city walls.
- 1 Kings 9:15 –Hazor and Megiddo and Gezer.
- Fortified cities in the wilderness–2 Chronicles 8:4-6.

PREACHING NOTES

(Points for explanation and application)

Note the connection between the “eyes” and “heart” in vs. 10, in Solomon’s self-indulgence (2:1-22; 18-23).

The word “weariness” emphasises the fact of continual activity with no satisfaction. It is all activity but is ultimately non-productive and will one day come to an end. It is illustrated by.

- The sun rises and sets (vs. 5),

- The wind comes round and round, like a dog chasing its tail (vs. 6),
- All the rivers run into the sea but the sea is not full (vs. 7).

In his search for happiness, Solomon learned that while there is pleasure in the world, he learned

- First, it only lasts for a while (vs. 10).
- Second, it is a hollow pleasure (2:1-11) it is not all fulfilling.
- Third, in the end he must leave it all behind (2:18-23).

Solomon was attempting to recreate his own version of Eden. References to Eden are embedded in the text. The same wording is used in this passage as is used in Genesis chapter two and three describing the Garden of Eden ...

- "Planted" 2:4,5–Genesis 2:8 God planted a garden
- "Built" 2:4–Genesis 2:22 God "made" a woman.
- "Made" 2:5–Genesis 1 and 2 "God made"
- "Trees" 2:5–Genesis 2:16 the trees in the garden.

Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes

Application is an important part of every sermon. The Bible demands a response, and we need to show our hearers how the teaching of the Bible affects us personally. One of the greatest difficulties with preaching from the book of Ecclesiastes is how to find ways to preach Christ.

There are several ways to preach Christ from Ecclesiastes. You could approach it as a series of contrasts between the emptiness of this world with the fullness of Christ. You could also develop the story of Redemption and show how Ecclesiastes is a commentary on Genesis 3:17-19, showing how Genesis three has come to pass, and that in that continuing story, Jesus will come and crush the head of the arch enemy, as God said he would.

You could also look for typology in the book. For example, Solomon was "king in Israel" (1:12), pointing forward to the all-satisfying King of kings. The "one Shepherd" also in 12:11 who give us wise words points us to our Saviour, the Chief Shepherd.

But the preacher could also preach Christ from Ecclesiastes by looking for New Testament references.

For example, in 1:3 where Solomon mentions the lack of "gain" or "profit" from this world. This word

is unique to Ecclesiastes and appears a total of ten times (1:3; 2:11,13 twice; 3:9; 5:9,16; 7:12; 10:10,11). This word comes from the verb “to remain” or “to be left over,” and the point that the author makes is that with all we can acquire in this world there is nothing left over—no profit.

There are other passages that confirm this (Job 1:21; Psalm 49:17; 1 Timothy 6:7), but the words of Jesus clearly echo what Solomon says here; “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world?” (Matthew 16:26; Mark 8:36; Luke 9:25).

See also Jesus’ words, “whose shall all this be?” (Luke 12:20), where he is making several points. First, these things will not be yours, you will take nothing with you of all that you have gathered. Second, these things will belong to someone else. Third, these things are out of your control.

“If one were to sift through the Law and the Prophets, he would not find a single word which would not draw and bring us to him [Christ].”

—John Calvin