

At the end of the Song of Songs, we heard the Bride declare that “love is as strong as death.”

As far as human love goes, that’s either hyperbole or crazy talk.

My love is *not* as strong as death.

As I sat by my brother-in-law’s hospital bed last week,
I felt the impotence of human love in the face of death.

When it comes to human love, death always wins.

The pattern of the Wisdom books helps us see what is going on.

Proverbs shows us the standard of wisdom.

The Song of Songs shows us the glory of beauty.

Ecclesiastes reminds us of the exceptions.

As Zack Eswine puts it,

“In Proverbs, a good man plus God’s love and wisdom equals a good life.
In Ecclesiastes a good man plus God’s love still dies like the beast or the fool.” (9)

The wisdom books sometimes seem a little strange to us.

We like Proverbs – the wise father who teaches wisdom to his sons.

But we blush a little at the Song of Songs –

the beautiful Bride who sings of her glorious Beloved.

And when we turn to Ecclesiastes, Zack Eswine says it well:

“Ecclesiastes sounds like a crazed man downtown.

He smells like he hasn’t bathed – looks like it too –

and as we pass by he won’t stop glaring at us and beckoning to us

that our lives are built on illusions, and that we are all going to die.” (5)

Introduction: the Preacher (v1)

We don’t know who wrote Ecclesiastes.

Verse 1 says that these are

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Many have argued that this can only be Solomon,

but others have pointed to the end of the book,

where, in 12:9, we are told that “the Preacher also taught the people knowledge”
making it sound like someone else is writing *about* what the Preacher taught.

To put it simply, the book never *says* that Solomon is the author,

so I prefer to leave the question open.

Rather, Ecclesiastes wants you to *think* about this book in a Solomonic context.

Solomon was adopted as God’s son –

there is a sense in which Solomon is portrayed as a new Adam.

He built the temple – and as we saw in Kings and Chronicles
(as well as in Genesis) –
the language of the building of the temple borrows heavily
from Genesis 2 – the creation of Eve.

So as we go through Ecclesiastes, we will see a lot of creation language,
and a lot of connections with Solomon.

What is the book of Ecclesiastes *doing*?

Some think that the Preacher is trying to convert skeptics,
so he adopts the argument of the skeptic in order to show that it ends in death.
I think it would be better to say that the Preacher is a pastor –
a shepherd, who is trying to teach wisdom to his congregation (the Assembly).

He's not taking on the persona of a skeptic in order to show the futility of skepticism –
rather, he's showing the futility of life under the sun.

In one sense he is saying that the skeptics are right!
“The present form of this world is passing away”
(that's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:31).
This world is broken.
And you can't fix it!

We want quick answers – easy answers –
“Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level”
“Seven Simple Secrets” for teachers
“Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover”

but the Preacher won't give us what we want.

He'll make us walk patiently, slowly, through the brokenness of life.
He'll ask us to reflect on the weariness and pain of life under the sun.

He'll give us partial answers –
answers that make us say,
“No, Preacher, that's not enough!”
To which he'll reply, “Ah, good, now you start to understand!
Walk with me some more.”

The Shorter Catechism starts with the answer:
“Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

Ecclesiastes takes 12 chapters to say what the Catechism puts into 12 words.

What is it that gives meaning and purpose to your life?

The Preacher will work through all sorts of options:
do you seek pleasure? money? sex? power?
What's the point?
You're just going to die!

How about wisdom? Surely the quest for wisdom is worthwhile!
But the wise will die just like the fool!
All is vanity and a striving after wind.

So long as you are focused on the pursuit of things “under the sun” –
then your quest is in vain.

The present form of this world is passing away.
The end of all earthly pursuits is death.

But it's not just death that the Preacher emphasizes.
It's futility – vanity – weariness – *and death*.

As you look back over your life,
what have you accomplished?
As you look forward to what comes next,
what are you seeking?

Listen to the Preacher as he calls to you:

1. “All Is Vanity” – the Weariness of Life (v2-11)

a. In the Beginning: Abel to Toil under the Sun (v2-3)

² *Vanity^[b] of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

³ *What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?*

“All is vanity.”

Translators have wrestled with this word “hebel” for centuries.

Some translate it as “meaningless” – others as “vanity” – others as “vapor.”

The basic meaning of the word is “vapor” –

referring to something transitory, fleeting, and elusive.

The word is used 38 times in Ecclesiastes – more than half of all its uses in the OT.

The key to understanding “hebel” is found in Genesis 4 and Romans 8.

In Genesis 4, we hear that Eve named her second son, “Hebel” –
that is, “Vapor.”

It is spelled *exactly* like the word “vapor.”

This is not an accident.

When you think of the story of Cain and Abel –
and how Abel’s life was fleeting and vain (murdered by his brother) –
truly he was named, “Hebel” – a vapor that passed away, leaving nothing behind.
Job said that his days were “a vapor” (Job 7:16) – a “hebel” that passes away.

Now, the Preacher says that everything is Abel.

The name “Abel” is not common in Hebrew.

So it’s unlikely that people thought of it as a proper name.

So when the Preacher says that everything is “Hebel”

anyone who knew the story of Cain and “Hebel” would make the connection.

Abel of Abels, says the Preacher, Abel of Abels! All is Abel.

What does Adam (a man) gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

Adam had been called to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it.

But what does he gain from all his toil?

Immediately after the fall, Cain and Abel set about this task.

Cain worked the ground and Abel tended sheep.

And then Cain murdered his brother, Abel.

What does a man gain by all his toil at which he toils under the sun?

Abel.

Vapor – vanity.

In the Greek translation of Ecclesiastes,

they used the word “futility” to translate “hebel” (vapor/vanity).

It’s the word that Paul uses in Romans 8, when he says,

“The creation was subjected to futility...”

In Romans 8, Paul is reflecting on this long wisdom tradition –

pointing to how *God* subjected the creation to futility,

in hope – so that the creation itself might groan with longing
for the glorious revelation of the sons of God.

b. Cycles of Futility (v4-11)

Verses 4-11 continue using the language of creation to speak of cycles of futility.

There are lots of parallels with Psalm 19 and Psalm 104 –

but whereas Psalm 19 and Psalm 104 use this language

to reveal the glory of God in the cycles of creation,

the Preacher reflects on the cycles of creation in the light of death.

Some would call this “cynical” – others would call it “realistic” –

but whatever you call it,

the Preacher calls you to take a hard look at your life.

You are going to die.

Verse 4 is the paradigm for this section:

⁴ *A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.*

The cycle of the generations imitates the cycles of creation.

This is not just the language of the skeptic.

God has subjected the creation to futility – to vanity – to Hebel.

Abel's fate is the fate of all mankind.

Death comes to all, because all have sinned.

Verses 5-7 reflects on the cycles of the natural order in the heavens, the earth, and the seas.

Verses 8-11 then reflect on the eyes, the ears, and the memory.

i) The Heavens, the Earth, and the Seas (v4-7)

⁵ *The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens^[c] to the place where it rises.*

⁶ *The wind blows to the south
and goes around to the north;
around and around goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.*

⁷ *All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.*

These three images: the sun, the wind, and the sea,
all reflect on the vanity of human life.

Is there any progress in the cycle of the sun?

Year after year, the same thing happens over and over again.

The sun rises and the sun goes down in a never-ending cycle.

Likewise, the wind goes around and around.

Does it ever stop?

Oh, you might be at a place where there is no wind for the moment,
but that is only because the wind is blowing somewhere else!

Just wait!

The wind will be back!

What about water?

The streams run to the sea.

But the sea never seems to get any higher –

and the streams never run out of water (at least not for long!).

The cycles of the heavens, the earth, and the seas (fire, air, and water)
remind us of the never-ending cycles of the generations.

The shroud of death darkens the door not only of the wicked, but also of the righteous!
It's not just the labor of fools that is in vain,
but the labor of "adam" – all humanity.

Verses 8-11 connects these themes:

ii) Eyes, Ears, and Memory (v8-11)

⁸ *All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.*
⁹ *What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.*
¹⁰ *Is there a thing of which it is said,
"See, this is new"?*
*It has been already
in the ages before us.*
¹¹ *There is no remembrance of former things,^[d]
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things^[e] yet to be
among those who come after.*

The eyes see – but are never satisfied – always looking for more!
The ears hear – but are never filled – we always want to hear more!
Our curiosity is insatiable –
our longing for information and knowledge cannot be satisfied!

But where does it get us?

There was once a great king of Babylon named Hammurabi.
Prior to 1901, we knew that there was such a king,
but we knew almost nothing about him.
Then, in 1901, a stele was discovered with a law code engraved on it.
Suddenly, Hammurabi became one of the most famous kings of the ancient world!

But how many kings of the ancient world had developed law codes before him?
The only difference was that someone found Hammurabi's!

How many great kings of the ancient world never bothered to write down their mighty deeds?
Or maybe they did – but then another king (or an earthquake, or a fire!)
destroyed the evidence!

Let me make it more personal:
What about you?

There are many people who have changed history through their labors.
But only a handful are remembered.

Two hundred years from now, even in your own family, who will remember you?

Well, let me give you an idea:

Of all of your ancestors who were alive in 1814,
how many can you name?

Only a genealogy buff will remember you!

And yet, still we seek to do something new – to see something new – to hear something new!

“What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.”

Oh, but what about the internet!

Surely that is something new!

Not really.

The internet revolution is just like the printing revolution –
or the codex revolution, or the papyrus revolution...

We’ve been here before – and we’ll be here again!

God created the heavenly bodies – the sun, moon, and stars –

for signs and season –

in order to mark the passing of the ages.

But after the fall,

the cycles of the heavens and the earth point to the cycles of human life and death.

We were created to be fruitful and multiply –

but too often we are barren – and often we are divided.

We were created to subdue the earth and have dominion over the creatures –

but now the creation has been subjected to futility –

and too often even our best attempts to govern the creation backfire!

Yes, due to God’s common grace, we still have a semblance of order.

But due to God’s common wrath, that order is ever-fragile.

In the Song of Songs, we saw that we had to pay attention

to the way the Song used language from the rest of scripture.

Even so, in Ecclesiastes.

And nowhere is this more important than in the role of verses 12-14 in chapter 1.

2. “Striving after Wind” – the Futility of Wisdom (v12-18)

a. The “Unhappy Business” that God Has Given Us (v12-15)

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

You cannot hear these words without thinking about Solomon –
especially in the context of searching out by wisdom
all that is done under heaven.

Solomon, the Son of David, is portrayed in scripture as a sort of Second Adam.

A failed second adam – it is true –
and that is why Ecclesiastes has such poignancy.
Adam’s sons turned to fratricide and division.
David’s sons did as well.
And after the death of Solomon, Israel was divided.

Solomon was great and wise and glorious –
all that God promised to Abraham and David came true in the days of Solomon –
and then died in the death of Solomon:

¹³ *And I applied my heart^[f] to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. ¹⁴ I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity^[g] and a striving after wind.*

This is a remarkable statement:

“It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.”

“An unhappy business” could be translated “an evil task” or “a bad venture,”
as it translated in 5:14.

God gave us the task of being fruitful and multiplying –
filling the earth and subduing it –
ruling and guarding the Garden.

Why does the Preacher call this “an evil task” or “a bad venture”?

It’s not that the work itself is bad.

Our creational labors are *good things*.

What is bad – what is evil – what is “unhappy” about it
is that it is futile!

“The present form of this world is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31).

All the things that we are busy with
are things that will pass away – a vapor –
all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Verse 15 illustrates the “unhappy business” –
the “bad venture” that God has given us to be busy with:

¹⁵ *What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.*

We’re not talking about *sin* in verse 15.
We’re talking about things that are crooked –

things that are simply missing.
It's not a sin that my brother-in-law has leukemia –
but it's crooked.

Maybe you can heal a few –
maybe you can keep them alive for a few more years –
but what is crooked cannot be made straight.

What is lacking cannot be counted.
Please, count the marbles on the pulpit!
You might say, "Ah, Preacher, there are zero marbles on the pulpit."
But ancient Hebrew has no word for "zero."

So when he says "what is lacking cannot be counted" he is right!

b. The "Vexation" of Wisdom – All You Know Is Futile (v16-18)

Verse 16 again reminds us of Solomon:

¹⁶ I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge."

Think of the wisdom of Solomon –
a wisdom that was not just about knowing things (or even knowing how to do things),
but a wisdom that was combined with the power to do things!
Solomon wanted wisdom, so that he might rule God's people well.

¹⁷ And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

Why?

*¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*

Think of every great advance in knowledge.
You cannot advance knowledge without increasing sorrow.
The wheel has brought great benefits!
And yet, because of the wheel we now have car accidents!

Nuclear technology saves lives – and destroys lives!

He who increases knowledge increases sorrow.
In much wisdom is much vexation.

I'm tempted to leave you there!
After all, the Preacher does!

But it will take us a few weeks to through the Preacher's twelve chapters,
and I don't want you to despair in the middle!

The weariness of life and the futility of wisdom point us to our need
for the Word to become flesh –
for Wisdom to enter into our futility –
for in him was Life, and that Life was the Light of men.

And yet even for Jesus,
“in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.” (v18)
Because the way of wisdom was the way of the cross.
Only when God himself entered our brokenness
does the riddle of Ecclesiastes become clear.
Only when the straight is cast down and broken by the crooked
do we understand the words of the Preacher:

“Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See, this is new’?”

In Jesus, a light shines that will never be darkened.
In Jesus, a stream flows that will never run dry.
In Jesus, a wind blows that will bring the gospel to the Nations,
so that every knee will bow and every tongue proclaim
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father!