

*Over the past two weeks my two brothers and I have moved my parents into assisted living in Illinois.
I have been impressed by my parents' wisdom and willingness to endure these changes.
It has not been easy. The most difficult aspect of it all has been the lack of mobility for my dad.
Last week we emptied their house so that it can be put on the market.
Some of you have been there.*

My brother rented a huge dumpster. I rented a truck.

After mom and dad took a few things, we went through it all.

Some went in the truck, or my brother's car, or to my other brother's home. Not much.

The rest went to Goodwill or the dumpster. By the end of the week the dumpster was full.

Here is the immediate lesson for Nancy and I.

Someday soon this will be the fate of all our stuff.

All your stuff too. Someday someone else will be going through all of it, throwing out most of it.

There is a book of the Bible that tells us of truths like this.

What is life all about after all? Is it about the accumulation of stuff?

Instantly we would say, "of course not."

And yet we often live for the next big purchase, the nicer truck, the bigger house, the better phone.

Is life about making a name for oneself, becoming legendary? The commercials say so.

Is life about building a bigger business, becoming successful? Is it about making more money?

Is life about getting all you can, canning all you get, and then sitting on your can?

Is life about squeezing as much fun as you can out of every moment? A cheap poster said it is.

Is life about building a great family where all the kids are well adjusted and remarkable?

Is life about leaving a legacy? I grew up in my faith thinking that it was.

This odd book in the Bible, Ecclesiastes, says differently.

Life under the sun is but a breath.

You might respond that this is simply obvious. It is obvious to you if you are old.

But people sure don't live like it is obvious. We are constantly trying to get everything just so...

The perfect job where we love to go to work, make the right money, have a good future.

The perfect house where everything is how we like it, cleaned up, just right.

The perfect car or truck that runs well and expresses the image we want.

Even my parents now are trying to situate themselves into a new normal.

But there is no normal. There will never be a perfect place that lasts. In a poof it will be gone.

Here today, gone tomorrow. That is what life is really like.

I have told a few recently that I wish I had studied Ecclesiastes when I was 20.

But, if I had, I don't know that I would have really gotten the point. Could I have heard it?

This book whispers to you when you are young. It shouts at you when you are old.

I have spent the past two years in this book of Ecclesiastes. Some of you know.

Read a bunch of books on it, two workshops with other pastors, two Bible studies, and now preaching.

These words we read were written some 3,000 years ago. They still apply.

They were written by a successful king in his old age, looking back on his life.

Solomon doesn't do what most kings do. This is not a work of self-promotion.

Ecclesiastes looks at life like few ever really do, with unvarnished honesty, eyes wide open.

This book is the opposite of pretend, pretentious, or any kind of make-believe.

This is a book for people who really wonder about life, and God, and everything.

This is an investigation, an exploration.

We begin with a thesis, a statement of fact established by experience of long life.

This thesis is followed by a question that is repeated often in the book in different forms, "Why bother?"

The question is then followed by observation and investigation, "Let's see what life is really like."

These investigations are then followed by conclusions that confirm the original thesis.

Life under the sun is but a breath, a poof, a candle in the wind.

Solomon is not unique in noticing this. Many others have as well, and some of them fairly ignorant of God.
Elton John sang his song in 1973, lamenting and commemorating Marilyn Monroe. The chorus,
And it seems to me you lived your life
Like a candle in the wind
Never knowing who to cling to
When the rain set in
And I would've liked to've known you
But I was just a kid
Your candle burned out long before
Your legend ever did

Now to God's words, which are so much better, insightful, and more challenging.

I. The thesis of the book: "All is hebel."

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

In verse 1 and in verse 12 the author of the book identifies himself. It is Solomon, David's son.
He is the one who prayed for wisdom when he began to reign. Here are his words as an old man.
He enjoyed a long reign in Jerusalem, was fabulously wealthy, and had too many wives.

In verse 2 he sets forth his thesis, the statement the entire book seeks to investigate and support.
In the NAS and ESV translate the verse,

"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

The NIV renders it,

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

I find the NIV here unfortunately misleading.

What is this word, repeated 5 times in one verse?

You might notice in my outline that I use the English transliteration of the Hebrew word.

Why? It's because there is really no English word that captures the meaning of the Hebrew.

So, I ask you to learn the Hebrew word, *Hebel*.

The word *hebel* has a range of meaning that includes vanity, breath, brevity, fleeting, shadow.

It is different from the Hebrew word *ruach*, translated breath, wind, or spirit.

Ruach focuses on the life-giving breath of God. It is the word used for the Spirit of God.

Hebel emphasizes the momentary, fleeting nature of each breath we take.

It is a blowing of the breeze, here one moment, gone the next.

The word *hebel* shows up in Psalm 39:5, "Surely all mankind is a mere breath [hebel]."

Again in Psalm 39:6, "Surely a man goes about as a shadow [hebel]."

And in Psalm 39:11, "Every man is a mere breath [hebel]."

Psalm 62:9, "Men of low degree are only vanity [hebel] and men of rank are a lie;

In the balances they go up; They are together lighter than breath [hebel]."

Psalm 94:11, "The LORD knows the thoughts of man, That they are a mere breath [hebel]."

Psalm 144:4, "Man is like a breath [hebel]; his days are like a passing shadow."

It is not that all is meaningless. In fact, in this book we will learn quite the opposite.

Life is full of meaning. But what does it mean? That is the great question.

No. *Hebel* carries no moral criticism. It is not the outlook of some novice philosopher spewing ennui (an-wi).

That's a listless discontent.

To say that all is *hebel* is to say that it is but a breath, a mist, a candle in the wind, here today, gone tomorrow.

In life, we seek lasting significance and it seems to elude us, always just out of our grasp.

We will tell ourselves that we have got it.

We will even lie to ourselves about how important we are.

But when we are gone, we will be forgotten. This is the sobering fact.

I cannot even remember my great-grandfather's name, not to mention your great-grandfather.

Your life is but a moment that is passing, a puff of wind, a bit of smoke, a breath.

And the world will move on.

Note that the book closes as it opens, after all Solomon's investigation.
Ecclesiastes 12:8, "Hebel of hebel, says the Preacher; all is hebel." It is all just a fleeting breath.
Then follows the concluding epilogue.

II. The question requiring investigation

Ecclesiastes 1:3

In Ecclesiastes 1:3 he asks a question right after his introductory thesis. All is *hebel*, he says.
So a question necessarily follows, "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?"
In other words, if everything is *hebel*, a fleeting breath, "What's the point of all that we do?"

Note the language, "under the sun."

This is the way that Solomon will often depict life in this world, "under the sun."

It calls up a vision of a man working hard in this world with the sun beating down on him.

The picture emphasizes our hard work, the difficulty of life in this world, and our own smallness.
What is the point of all that we do in this difficult world where we seem so small and life is so brief?
Do you understand the question? Do you feel the question?

Now, in the text, before we get to any answer to this question, Solomon recites a poem.
It is a poetic illustration of this fact that life under the sun is really *hebel*, a fleeting breath.

III. A poem about the world we live in

Ecclesiastes 1:4-11

This poetic picture of the world we live in lasts 8 verses.

Four verses about the reality of the world itself; four verses about the condition of man in this world.

What is the world like? (vss. 4-7)

These four verses work together to establish one point. What is it? Do you see it?

Nothing really ever changes.

It is astounding that Solomon, 3,000 years ago, could have seen this so clearly.

He had no globe, no NOAA, no weather service, no modern environmental studies.

And yet he sees. Generations come and go. The sun goes around and around.

The wind goes around and around. The waters go around and around.

When you die it will all be just about how it was when you were born, no matter who you are.

What about life in this world then? The second half of the poem.

Are you ready? Because this might land pretty hard. Solomon does not soften the blow.

Here is his illustration of what *hebel* really means for us in all its unvarnished honesty.

What is life really like for mankind in this world? (vss. 8-11)

vs. 8 It is never enough for us; we are always left wanting more.

vs. 9 There is really no actual progress ever made by anyone toward anything worthwhile.

vs. 10 There is really nothing new ever. History is repeating itself. And if you are willing, you can see it.

Governments do what governments have always done, in spite of all their promises.

Communication is all about words, actions, and pictures.

Families still have all the same problems. People still want money.

Roads are always under construction and we still have potholes.

vs. 11 No one will remember you or the things that you do.

Do you see now the need for that question of verse 3? This poem underscores the need for that question.
If life in this world is really *hebel*, like this, then what is the point of it all?

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

So, here I pause for a moment and ask you a question.

Are you interested in finding out the answer to this question?

Because, if you are, you will learn from this book if you are willing to be led along by a wise old king.

If not, this book will be boring, discouraging, even terrifying.

So, next, the old king continues in a more personal tone. We are prepared by him to begin an investigation.

IV. The method of the book: investigation and conclusion

Ecclesiastes 1:12-15

Notice the shift here to the first person.

Solomon had laid out his case for the *hebel* of the life we live in this world, “under the sun.”

Now he wants us to know that he himself has done an investigation of this life.

In verse 12 he identifies himself personally as the one introduced in verse 1.

In verse 13 he reiterates and expands his question of verse 3.

This is what he will be doing throughout the book.

He will “search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.”

He is going to do this to find out what a man can “gain from all his toil under the sun.” (vs. 3)

He will be seeking a solution to this “unhappy business.” (vs. 13)

Literally, this “bad time that God has given us to be busy with.” It is a dark picture.

But, as Solomon works us through his investigations and conclusions, he will seek to solve the picture.

Allow me to say this at the outset. His solution might not be what you expect.

In verse 14 Solomon recalls his conclusion of verse 2.

“I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”

Literally he now describes the *hebel* as a “chasing after the wind.”

Have you ever tried... to chase the wind and catch it? You can't.

You can't keep up, and if you can you cannot grasp it and make it yours.

Life under the sun is like that. As soon as you think you have got it in your grasp, then it eludes you again.

As soon as you think you have got things figured out, squared away, then you don't.

Not that you would ever feel that way. Maybe you don't.

Life is elusive, fleeting, here today, gone tomorrow. You can never hold on and keep it.

I was visiting with my daughter Katie recently.

We recalled together the days when all our family was a unit and we hung out together.

Jon was a senior, then Emily, then Julia, Katie was in 4th grade. It was a wonderful time.

We went on vacations together all in one car with a carrier on top. It was really fun.

And then, poof, it was gone, just a memory. I look back. I wish I could have kept that.

*But life is *hebel*, an elusive breath.*

Even more, I look back and wish I would have enjoyed the moment then more than I did.

Back then I was working my tail off to try to make things better, to deal with frustrations, worries.

Now I realize, I ought to have enjoyed the moment more. It was a gift from God.

There are a lot of gifts from God in life at every stage.

And so, we look back at the text and see something we might have read past if we didn't stop to notice.

I am deeply grateful for other pastors and authors like David Gibson, Philip Ryken, and Doug Wilson.

Is there anything to be gained in this *hebel* life?

The answer so far is an emphatic “no.”

In verse 15, Solomon tells us that however we might try, we cannot fix it.

But, in verse 13, we have been told, albeit cryptically, that life is a gift from God.

This gets to what David Gibson in his book Living Life Backward calls the main message of Ecclesiastes.

“Life in God's world is gift, not gain.”

Douglass Wilson in his book *Joy at the End of the Tether* writes about Ecclesiastes,

“The gift of God does not make the meaninglessness go away; the gift of God makes the vanity enjoyable.”

So, I close with this encouragement as we prepare in coming weeks to learn about life from Solomon.

Don't try to get more in life. No matter how hard you try, you will eventually lose it all.

Don't try to make your mark, progress, or change the world. You can't and you won't.

Do not seek to get everything just right, get to the perfect place, and have all the problems solved.

It is impossible, and even if you think you get there, in the next moment it will be gone.

Every moment is a gift from God. Embrace His gift and the giver of gifts. Enjoy the gift as it comes.

And bless others in the moment so that they too can enjoy God's gifts, and be thankful.

And we will discover that when you live in God's world in this way, there is a shining reward at the end.