

Everything is vanity and a striving after wind.

This is the most important line in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Everything is *hebel*, herding *ruach*.

Everything is vapor, herding breath.

Imagine vapor trying to control the wind!

Or, to connect with Genesis –

imagine Abel, the shepherd, trying to herd the Spirit.

The Spirit blows wherever he wishes.

You cannot control the wind!

And yet, verses 24-25 seem to suggest that we should find joy in our toil!

Which is it?

Carpe diem (seize the day!)

or everything is *hebel* – vanity?

Everything is Awesome!

or we're all going to die?

How do you live with both?

My brother-in-law is dying (he still may recover and survive for a few years),
but he will die, and then he will be forgotten.

I doubt that anyone who knows him will forget him,

but 200 years from now, no one will remember him.

Even a life that is well-lived,

even a death that is well-died,

will be forgotten.

So seize the day!

Enjoy your work!

But you're all going to die!

Ecclesiastes will not let you live comfortably on either side of that dilemma.

“The struggle of this reality is often very hard and very rewarding.” (Dave Shank)
which is the very reason why Ecclesiastes says it like this.

If you try to “harmonize” the futility with the joy,

the result will clash with the experience of discord that we feel.

Interpreters have taken two different approaches to Ecclesiastes:

Everything earthly is vanity – so you should turn away from earthly things,
and look towards heavenly things (Jerome)

Others say you should find joy in the earthly things – in spite of their transience (Luther)

It's arguable that Paul is reflecting on this in Colossians 3:2

Set your minds on things above – not things that are on earth.

There is a sense in which Paul wants you to be so heavenly minded
that you are no earthly good!

Because when Paul talks about being “earthly minded”

he's talking about sin and rebellion.

But when you are truly “heavenly minded”

you can properly enjoy the things of earth.

As we talk about the “vanity” of life under the sun,

we need to keep in mind that the root meaning of the word is “vapor.”

But the English word “vapor” cannot translate every use of the Hebrew word.

After all, would you ever think of using “vapor” to talk about idolatry?

And yet of the 32 uses of “hebel” outside of Ecclesiastes in the OT,
almost half occur in the context of idolatry.

1 Kings 16:26 says that Omri and Israel provoked the LORD to anger
by their idols.

Except, the word “idol” is not used.

It's “hebel.”

They provoked the LORD by their “vapors.”

It is worth reflecting on Romans 1:21 – where Paul says

“for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him,
but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.”

Indeed, God has subjected the whole of creation to futility

(think of Romans 8, which we saw last time

connects with the vanity/vapor of Ecclesiastes).

Ecclesiastes does not consider the world ‘as it should be’ – as it was in the beginning –
but the world ‘as it is’ – the world as fallen into sin and idolatry, and haunted by death.

To put it simply:

The autonomous quest for wisdom, meaning, and joy is doomed!

“Thus the futility Ecclesiastes exposes

is that of trying to find meaning while embracing human autonomy

in a world that depends at every point on its Creator.” (Bartholomew, 97)

While the author never names himself as Solomon,
the author certainly wants us to think of Solomon as the speaker.

Solomon is portrayed in scripture as a sort of “second Adam” –
but a “second Adam” in the sense of a *repeat* of Adam.
Like Israel, coming out of Egypt, Solomon was called to succeed where Adam failed –
but instead, he echoed Adam’s fall into sin.

In 1 Kings 3:9, Solomon said,
“Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people,
that I may discern between good and evil.”
Solomon asks for the “knowledge of good and evil”
so that he can govern the people of God.

Now Ecclesiastes 2, describes Solomon’s pursuit of pleasure, wisdom, and despair!

1. Test One: Pleasure, Possessions, and Desire (v1-11)

I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity.^[a] ² I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” ³ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

Verses 1-3 describe a wise pursuit of pleasure *and even folly!*
I think of the way that Francis Schaeffer studied culture, philosophy, and music.
He read books, watched movies, and went to art exhibits and concerts,
that most Christians probably wouldn’t want to see or hear.

Here Solomon speaks of investigating, “laying hold on” folly, while still guided by wisdom.

In verse 2, when he calls laughter “madness” –
it would probably be better to translate it “wild reveling” – (Robert Alter)
since the point is not “insanity” but the unruly indulgence in pleasure.

The unruly indulgence in pleasure is now simply called “normal.”

We only live for a few days –
so why not just enjoy life?
And further, God gave us this creation for us to enjoy –
for us to rule and guard –
to plant gardens and vineyards, right?

We hear more of that creational/adamic language in verses 4-8.

⁴ *I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. ⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in*

my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ *I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines,^[b] the delight of the sons of man.*

Notice how central is the “I” in verses 4-8.

I made...I built...I made...I planted...I made...I bought...I had...I gathered...I got...

The LORD planted a garden in Eden, and called Adam to tend and guard it.

Now Solomon makes gardens (plural!) and parks and vineyards, etc.

In 1 Kings 1:37, we are told that the LORD made Solomon great.

Here, in Ecclesiastes 2, the king makes himself great.

His self-absorption reminds us more of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4...

And in verse 7 he boasts that he had “more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.”

If this is Solomon, then it is a slightly deranged Solomon –
a Solomon whose wisdom borders closely on folly!

It’s worth noting that in verse 7 – I “bought” – or gained – is the same root as “Cain” in Gen 4.

“The names of the two brothers are heavy with portent:

Permanence and Impermanence, Possession and Ephemerality

Koheleth sees that in a profound way the history of *adam*, humankind,

mirrors the history of the younger brother, Hevel/Abel,

who enters the biblical narrative only to die.”

What is the importance of this for Ecclesiastes?

“The one thing we know about Hevel/Abel is that he offered the best of his flock
as a sacrifice that brought God pleasure (Gen 4:4).

And is not just that the point of human life, to give some pleasure to God,
to make our work in this world holy by offering something of it to God?”

(Ellen Davis, quoted in Treier, 124).

And at the end of chapter two, there is great weight placed on the one who *pleases* God.

Something we know from the story of Abel

is that we need a Son of Adam who will please God.

Solomon?

He got off to a good start, but didn’t end well.

⁹ *So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem.*

In light of chapter 1 (esp. verses 10-11),

this is rather ironic.

I became great.

But no one will remember me.

Also my wisdom remained with me.¹⁰ And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Listen to what the Preacher says!

“my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil”

But when I considered all that my hands had done –

“behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind,
and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”

We live in a day when pleasure is god.

We think that our work should be “enjoyable” –

and if we do not take pleasure in our work,

we immediately start thinking about finding another job.

The Preacher says that he found pleasure in all his toil.

But even if you find pleasure in all your toil – it’s but a vapor,
a striving after wind.

We live in a day when pleasure is god.

If you don’t like your work – and you can’t get out –

then at least you can enjoy the weekend!

My heart found pleasure in all my toil...

At the end of chapter 2, the Preacher will say something similar –
but with a huge difference!

“for apart from God who can eat or who can have enjoyment.” (2:25)

If you seek pleasure, you will find vanity.

If you seek laughter, you will find futility.

If you seek to cheer your body with wine, you will find vapor.

2. Test Two: Wisdom, Madness, and Folly (v12-17)

¹² So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. ¹³ Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.

Again, in verse 12, when it says “wisdom and madness and folly”

it would fit better with the whole context of the chapter to translate “madness”
as “wild revelry.”

I turned to partying.

When I was a boy, Christians didn't touch alcohol.

Today, we have turned away from that view –

but there is a danger that we will go too far in the other direction.

Gregory of Nyssa (back in the fourth century) lived at a time

when almost *everyone* drank wine.

But he points out in his sermons on Ecclesiastes,

“once wine immoderately exceeds what is necessary,

it is tinder for licentiousness, the means to self-indulgence,

injury to youth, deformity to age, dishonor for women,

a poison inducing madness, sustenance for insanity,

destruction to the soul, death to the understanding...

From it comes unjustified mirth, lamentation without reason,

senseless tears, unfounded boasting, shameless lying,

craving for the unreal, expectation of the impracticable,

monstrous threats, groundless fear...the promise of impossible things”

(quoted in Treier, 140)

The moderate use of wine is a good thing –

like the moderate use of everything else!

But it is not hard to see how wine becomes the servant of folly!

If you are not sure whether you should have another glass – stop!

And so in 2:13, he sees that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly.

Of course, 1:18 said that “in much wisdom is much vexation,

and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”

How do you hold these two together?

Both are true.

Wisdom *is* better than folly –

even though wisdom will simply increase vexation and sorrow!

As verses 14-16 puts it,

wisdom will not save you from death –

but at least it will give you a clear perspective on the futility of life!

¹⁴The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. ¹⁵Then I said in my heart, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?” And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. ¹⁶For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!

So what's the point of being wise?

We're all going to die!

There is no enduring remembrance – everyone will be forgotten!

Now, it is really important to know that in verse 16,
when he says “there is no enduring remembrance”
the word translated “enduring” is the word translated “forever” elsewhere.
(The Hebrew word “olam” means an “age” – or a very long time!)

So the wise – like the fool – will not be remembered forever.
There is no “forever memory”!
You may think that by putting all your memories in electronic form,
they will endure!
But just wait for that giant sunstorm to send a solar pulse
that will blot out all electronic storage on earth!
(Or something like that!)

You might say, “But what about God?!”
The Preacher would reply –
No, I’m just talking about life “under the sun.”

¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Everything under the sun was *evil* to me.
I know that the ESV says “grievous” (and that works just fine) –
but it’s the same word “ra” that was used in chapter 1:13
to refer to the “evil business” that God keeps man busy with.
What is done under the sun –
what is done in this life –
was “evil to me.”

Have you ever hated life?
Everything ends in death.
Everything will be forgotten.

What’s the point of all that you do?
All is vanity – vapor.
All is a striving after wind.

I should mention that when the Preacher says “striving after wind” –
he is using the word “*ruach*” (also translated “Spirit”).

Everything is Abel – a striving after Ruach.

And so the Preacher considers the third test: despair.

3. Test Three: Despair (v18-23)

¹⁸ *I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, ¹⁹ and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.*

When you think of the Solomonic voice in this passage,
it takes on particular resonance –
because everyone in Israel knew that Rehoboam, his son, was a fool!
All of Solomon’s work – all of his labors – all of his wisdom –
was squandered and destroyed by his son.

You have no control over what your heirs do with your property.
You cannot control your legacy.
You can try – you can teach – you can leave all sorts of helpful hints –
but who knows whether he will be wise or a fool?

So the Preacher says that he gave up his heart to despair:

²⁰ *So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun,*

Sometimes despair is intentional.
Depression is not just something that happens to you.
There are often decisions you make that results in depression and despair.

Verse 21 reflects on one particular reason for despair:

²¹ *because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it.*

There is no reference to a “son” here –
so we should reflect on the fact that Rehoboam only received 2 tribes –
Jeroboam took control of the other 10.
Even the king cannot control who will receive his inheritance!
Dynasties rarely last for long

This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?

At the end of the day, what do you have?
At the end of your life, what have you gained?
All your toil under the sun – what does it give you?

Verse 23 weaves the language of the Preacher’s quest together:

²³ *For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.*

Days are full of sorrow.
Work is a vexation.
Even at night, he finds no rest.

It's all vanity.
It's all vapor.
 Fleeting.
 Ephemeral.
 Transient.

People have often tried to figure out the literary structure of Ecclesiastes.
 There are innumerable proposals – most of which have failed to convince others.
 The book weaves various motifs together,
 with different patterns and loops,
 because that's the point of the book!
 The structure of Ecclesiastes mirrors its meaning.
 In other words, you will *sort of* find a pattern in the book of Ecclesiastes,
 but every time you think that you've "got it" –
 you'll find another wrinkle that doesn't quite fit!

**Conclusion (in a temporary and partial sense of the word): “Eat and Drink and Find
Enjoyment in Your Toil” (v24-26)**

²⁴ *There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment^[c] in his toil.*

In 1:13-14, we heard of the “unhappy business” – literally, the “evil business” –
 that God has given to the children of man.
Everything that is done under the sun is “vanity and a striving after wind.”

So toil is futile and vain –
 but have a good time!

Is that what the Preacher is saying?

Lift up your eyes.
 You've been focusing on life “under the sun.”
 But think beyond the sun.
 Above the highest heaven there is joy.

This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for apart from him^[d] who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Here in 2:26-27, the Preacher introduces a new distinction –
the difference between the one “who pleases God” and the “sinner.”
It may seem odd to say that the sinner gathers and collects
only to give to the one who pleases God –
since in 2:19, he just admitted that he does not know
whether the one who comes after him will be wise or a fool!
(and *everyone* who ever read the book knew that Rehoboam was a fool!)

In verse 21, the person toils with wisdom and knowledge and skill.
Now in verse 26, the one who pleases God has wisdom and knowledge and joy.
The sinner has simply the business of gathering and collecting.
Wisdom and knowledge and skill is common to humanity.
But “gathering and collecting” reveals the human obsession with acquisition.
“Joy” reflects the divine gift –
or, more precisely, the *reception* of the divine gift.

Ecclesiastes points out that Solomon was not enough.

We need a Son of Adam – a Son of David – who pleases God.
And we have heard the Father say,
“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Understand that the pleasures of this life are fleeting –
they are transitory – they are “hebel.”

If you would understand the strangeness of this partial and tentative conclusion,
then listen again to Genesis 4:4 –

The LORD had regard (looked with favor) on Hebel and his offering. (Gen 4:4)

Hebel was fleeting – his short life would have appeared meaningless, perhaps,
to those who knew him.
But this vapor – this vain and fleeting life –
received favor from the LORD.

So what are we to do?

The best thing that the Preacher can think of
is that we might “eat and drink and find enjoyment” in our toil –
because joy is from God – as is eating!

From Abraham to Jesus, at the heart of our fellowship with God
there is a covenant meal.

Moses, Aaron, and the 70 elders of Israel ate and drank with God at Sinai.
Eating and drinking and finding enjoyment in our toil
is precisely where we meet with God.

But think about the image of the covenant meal:

“To envisage the ultimate feasting is to imagine an endless overflow of communication
between those who love and enjoy each other.
It embraces body language, facial expressions,
the ways we eat, drink, toast, dance and sing;
and accompanying every course, encounter and artistic performance
are conversations taken up into celebration.” (Ford in Bartholomew, 96)

Think about Jesus’ own ministry:

“Jesus went to meals, weddings and parties and had a feast-centered ethic.
The images are vivid: water turned into wine;
guests jockeying for places at table and being told to aim for the lower places...
a woman sinner shocking the company by anointing Jesus and being forgiven by him;
the reversal of expectations as the poor, handicapped and outsiders of all sorts
are welcomed at the feast of the Kingdom of God
while those who thought themselves sure of a place are left out;
advice about not inviting to your banquet those who will invite you back;
a master sitting a servant down and serving him;
the Prodigal Son welcomed back unconditionally with the best robe, a ring, shoes,
the fatted calf, and a celebration;
Jesus’ last supper, which was probably also a celebration of the Passover...”
(Ford, in Bartholomew, 98)

“Much of his ministry is remembered through the food and dining metaphors...
His food was the will of the one he called Father,
and this divine will, in turn, became the enduring banquet
for any who dared to follow him.” (Anderson and Foley in Bartholomew, 98)

And Jesus promised that he would one day eat and drink with us in the kingdom of his Father.
The Lord’s Supper – the Eucharist – is our joyous communal gathering,
where we “eat and drink and find enjoyment” in our toil –
because Jesus is the beloved Son who has been pleasing to God,
and therefore draws us near to the Father.