

The Book of Ecclesiastes

Study 1 Under the Sun all is Vanity

Introduction

Ecclesiastes has been described as a book about real life with a real God. The author of Ecclesiastes records for us the words of “The Teacher” or “The Preacher”. The Teacher devotes himself to the pursuit of wisdom, pleasures, hard work, and riches and at the end of each pursuit he proclaims that all is meaningless. The English word translated “meaningless” or in some translations “vanities”, is the Hebrew word “Hevel”. “Hevel” can be translated as meaningless, but it also very much refers to something that looks real on the outside, but when you try to grasp it, it slips away. Like vapour or a cloud, when we try to grasp at life we discover we cannot hold onto it or control it or predict it. Life can also be a paradox. It does not always turn out as we might expect or as we plan. We fall sick, we are laid off work, we have a life changing accident. Sometimes the good suffer while it appears that the wicked prosper.

Ecclesiastes can appear to be very pessimistic about life, but at the end of the book the author helps us as the reader to reflect on what the Teacher has said. Life is meaningless, “hevel” apart from a relationship with the living God. Life is pointless without God. “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” As Christians who have the New Testament we know that a relationship with God is possible through God the Son, Jesus Christ. And we know that because Jesus lived this life with purpose, so too do our lives have purpose, purpose now and into eternity.

READ Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:11

1. How many times is the word “meaningless” or “vanities” used in the first two chapters? What does this tell you about the importance of this theme to the Book? Are there any other significant words or themes that you see repeated in chapters 1-2?

2. The phrase “life under the sun” is a key phrase in the Book. What do you think it means? How does this phrase help explain the point the Teacher is making?
3. In these passages what does the Teacher reveal about life, its frustrations our inability to control it and it’s perceived meaninglessness or “hevel”?
4. Do you agree with the Teacher? Why or why not. Do you feel the Teacher is too pessimistic? What frustrations have you experienced in life?
5. What difference does knowing Jesus make to our ‘labour’ including our jobs? Compare 1 Corinthians 15:58 and Ecclesiastes 1:3. [Our “labour in the Lord” includes everything we do. Our “labour” as Christians should always be for God’s glory.]
6. As Christians how can we see all that happens in the world, it’s frustrations and futilities, and still not lose hope?

Notes

- The word meaningless or vanities “hevel” in Hebrew is mentioned 30 times in the book of Ecclesiastes. It can also be translated as breath, vapour or mist.
- Perhaps you have noticed that God appears absent in almost all of chapters 1-2. No mention is made of Him until the very end of chapter 2, in 2:24-26. And even then, the Preacher/Teacher continues to argue that life is meaningless.
- Ecclesiastes is one of five books in the OT called Wisdom Literature. These books about wisdom could be summarized this way:
 - Job teaches us why we sometimes suffer.
 - Psalms teaches us how to worship and pray.
 - Proverbs teaches us how to behave.
 - Song of songs teaches us how to love.

- Ecclesiastes teaches us how to live in a world that does not always make sense.

Ultimate and lasting satisfaction is found only in Christ and in enjoying God's gifts through him. If we neglect God in our pursuit of life, everything will slip through our grasp. It will fail to satisfy.