

Ecclesiastes: Worldview of work, wisdom, and worship, and the essence of Time

For the last four years, I've been preoccupied with the book of Ecclesiastes. As the subtitle suggests, I've found it to be a foundational text on how the followers of the Living God should live. I have come to love these words so I wanted to share them with you. First, let's open with a word of prayer.

Dear Heavenly Father, may my words adequately reflect yours, and may our hearts be bent to you through them. In Jesus Name, Amen.

The book of Eccl is a difficult book to read with understanding. It's kind of designed that way because wisdom discovered for yourself is more profound and will have a greater impact on your life. Unlike Proverbs then, Ecclesiastes makes you work to acquire its wisdom. As we no longer have Solomon himself here to guide us, it's not surprising that there are many different views on how to read and interpret this book.

I found two common views on how to interpret Eccl. First is that Solomon, or the author, was a depressed, sin filled man who is discussing a life without God. This view reduces Eccl to nihilistic hedonism. Meaning, there is no purpose for anything so therefore seek pleasure. And thus, dismiss it as unorthodox.

The second one separates the book into two voices, the author and Preacher. It ascribes all the talk of meaninglessness and vanity to the Preachers and the parts about fearing God to the author and holds these two voices in tension. This generally leads to a discounting of the Preacher voice in favor of the author voice. This view comes from the introduction and conclusion the book, which are written in the third person, while the rest of the book is written in the first person. Put a different way, in the beginning and end of the book the text talks about Solomon where the middle is Solomon talking. I take the view this is just a literary device Solomon is using for emphasis.

However, not knowing these views at the time, I approached Eccl with Paul's second letter to Timothy in mind, that, like the rest of the Bible, all of Eccl is God breathed, and not the words of a man but rather the words of God Himself, using Solomon as His pen. A man who God declared to be the wisest man of all time.

Another thing that makes Eccl hard is that Solomon is more Eastern in his thinking than we're used to. What I mean that is that Solomon uses examples rather than lines of logic. We're used to Paul giving a series of points and following up it up with his conclusion. Hence all the "therefores" in his letters. But Solomon is more like Jesus, who used parables and occasionally followed them up with an explanation. So instead of lines of reasoning, you're going to find a variety of examples from different perspectives. And these examples aren't always even organized in a discernable logical fashion. So be prepared to pull ideas together from all over the book.

However, this doesn't mean the book is chaos. Solomon wrote the book primarily from his perspective, but in a relatable way. He knows that we are self-centered by nature

and only really care about the question, “What about me?” Solomon is using that immediate question to get us thinking about what he is saying and in that way, entices his reader to try on and validate each of the perspectives that he presents us with. What you end up with is experiential knowledge, which is the classical definition of wisdom. Not absolute truths that you have to accept on faith, but an understanding grounded in your actual experience of life, or the experience of others that you can identify with. So, as we go through the book, let’s answer that question, “What about me?” From that vantage point, Eccl ends up being very practical.

What I have found is that there are three main themes interwoven through the book and together they give us a single, cohesive world view. My goal tonight is to lay out these three concepts to give you sign posts when you study Eccl on your own. Next week we will have time to go over a few other pertinent points and hopefully there will be time left for questions. Also for your future study, I’d like to throw out the name Haddon Robinson. In preparing for this, I hunted for anyone who viewed Eccl the same way I did and Pastor Jim suggested Haddon Robinson. Robinson has an excellent sermon, should you be interested in hearing more details.

At this point, we are going to start working through the diagram on your handout. I want to point out the small numbers across the middle. Those are chapter references designed to give you a general idea of where each theme is predominantly found, and point to the key texts that we will be looking at to explain them.

The first theme starts in the second verse of the book,

Eccl. 1:2 “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

This is a 5-fold repetition, which is like underlining, with bold and italic 50-point font and blinking lights for good measure. This is important.

Vanity here is the Hebrew word “Hevel” – translated into English in Eccl as vanity, futility, meaningless, falsity, empty, transitory. These are all true translations given the context, but the word literally means smoke or vaporous. It is often accompanied in Eccl with the phrase: a striving, chasing, or feeding after the wind. This is especially futile given that you cannot catch the wind, and if you did, it would cease to be wind. We spend our lives as smoke chasing after wind. There is nothing of substance here.

Smoke has 4 properties that help us understand what Solomon is talking about. First, smoke looks solid, but it isn’t. It pretends to be more than it is. Second, smoke diffuses quickly. The way Solomon puts it is that “there is no remembrance of former things.” Third, smoke has a source, generally fire. In our case, our source is God. Fourth, smoke has an unpredictable trajectory. If you ever stood in front of a campfire, you know it is hard to avoid the smoke. You have to keep moving because it is constantly shifting direction in unpredictable ways. Solomon makes this point often: we don’t, and can’t, know the future.

This leads me to my favorite English word for hevel, because it bounds up all these concepts into one: VainGlory. This is 2 words smashed together into an oxymoron, vain, meaning lacking substance, and glory, meaning full of weight and substance. The sense is that hevel lacks substance, but we treat it as having all substance. Instead, Solomon is pointing us to God, who is glory, weight, substance, but who we treat as lacking substance.

Let's visualize this. I have a rock, here. It is heavy. It has actual substance. We tend to picture ourselves as mini-gods. Little rocks; pebbles, like this one. Yeah, we're not as big as God, but we're still substantial in our own right. But it's not true; we are smoke, as visualized by this snow globe. But Chris, we are made in the image of God. I have here an image of a rock, a picture. While it resembles the rock, it has different properties. It is 2 dimensional instead of 3d; it is static, only showing the rock at one time; and most importantly, it is made of a different substance than the rock. I can tear a picture; I can't tear a rock. Only Jesus was man and still had the substance of God. We're just man, an image. We're not mini rocks. We're smoke. Only God has the weight and substance of glory.

In this verse is that pesky little word "all". How do we understand that little word when I just said that God is not smoke? Throughout the book, Solomon scopes his discussion with the phrase "under the sun", so much so that he uses that phrase more than he uses the word Hevel. Everything under the sun, or in the physical world, is smoke. This does not mean "for the non-believer" but rather everything except God. Christian or not, you are smoke and so is everything else in our experience.

So, given all this, let's ask the question, "What about me?" The answer: I AM SMOKE! And more importantly, GOD IS NOT! This is the foundational and most repeated concept in the book, so if we reject this concept, the rest of the book will make little sense. It is not bore out of despair, but rather reality. A reality we don't like to face.

Now, what happens when smoke meets something solid? It gives way!

Fear is the instinctual response for a person coming face to face with God. Pastor Don as touched on this several times, so I'll be brief, but you'll find examples of this phenomenon in Isaiah when he meets God and assumes that he is going to die or again in the disciples when they realize Who Jesus is. This is the appropriate response. Look at Eccl. 12:13-14:

13 The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. 14 For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

Note that this is a conclusion, or a therefore, so Fear and Obey are built upon the rest of the book, specifically, the previous theme of our smokiness. You might be tempted to transpose "fear" with "respect", but the word means terrified. This is actual fear. Now, there are several possible responses to fear. You're probably familiar with the body's fight or flight response to fear. So that's two options. Another one sometimes found in

extreme danger is a freeze response. These are all instinctual reactions but not particularly helpful when dealing with God. This verse is suggesting an alternative: follow and obey. We are told to obey God expressly because He is going to judge us. There is no running or fighting God. Not even freezing is going to save us. We will be judged and the fear of this should encourage us to obey.

This concept of fearing God builds through chapters 3, 7, and 8; the concept of God's Just Judgement is explicitly stated in chapter 11 but implied throughout; the culmination of this theme ends with Obey right here at the end. This is the only time it is expressly mentioned. This is intentional. Just like the concept of smoke got flashing lights with a 5-fold repetition, Obey gets its own flashing lights by standing alone at the end.

Most expositions on Ecclesiastes that I have seen stop here in one form or another. It leads to the view that this is a depressing book full of meaninglessness and fear. But Solomon doesn't stop here! Let's revisit our original question. What about me?! If I'm smoke and God is the rock that's going to judge me, where does that leave me? How should I function in life? Solomon's answer to this is scattered like stepping stones or guideposts 7 times throughout the book. When you start to get mired down with all the talk of vanity, Solomon gives some form of this answer:

¹⁸ Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward. ¹⁹ Furthermore, as for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, He has also empowered him to eat from them and to receive his reward and rejoice in his labor; this is the gift of God. ²⁰ For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.

Again, this is based on our smokiness, specifically, "during the few years of his life". Also in view is God's sovereignty, He is the actor giving and keeping. These verses aren't in contrast with the other two themes, but are built on them.

Now a lot of people, when they hear "eat, drink, and be merry" they add on "for tomorrow you die". It's the view that you should indulge now because that's all you have, also called nihilistic hedonism. But that's not what Solomon is saying. His reason isn't, because you're going to die, but because "this is the gift of God". Why you do something is just as important as what you do.

Let's talk about these Gifts. On your handout and the screen is a matrix laying them out. The existence of work is a gift from God; the existence of the fruit from that labor is a gift from God. Note here that the 2 are disjoint, God does not need to give fruit because you worked, and He can give you fruit even though you didn't work for it. Next God gives Joy in the work and Joy in the fruit. Joy is dependent on Existence. You can't enjoy something you don't have. However, the existence of work or fruit does not necessitate Joy. This is an extra gift to those whom God chooses to give it.

Now, remember that these are gifts. What do we do with gifts? More pointedly, what do we tell our children to do with gifts? First, we tell them to say thank you! The fact that it is a gift should lead us to thanksgiving. Second, gifts have greater value than the thing that is given, just because it is given, especially because of Who gave it. God Himself gave us these gifts. They should have immense value simply because he gave it.

What exactly did Solomon mean by “work” and “joy”? First, let’s tackle work.

The common Hebrew word for work is “Avodah” meaning work as service, obedience, and ultimately, worship. It has a positive connotation that could easily be seen as a gift. This is NOT the word Solomon uses. Instead, he uses the more obscure “Amal” meaning work as toil, trouble, or difficult labor. This has a very definite negative connotation and is generally not associated as a gift, almost a curse. But that is what Solomon says: Toil is a gift from God and something God attaches joy to. So whatever job you have, it falls under these verses. There’s no job too dull or aggravating to apply.

Further, note that this very toil is being connected at the end to Obedience. I am smoke, so fear God and obey Him in your toil. Solomon is constructing from base elements the concept of Avodah, work as worship, from Amal, work as toil. Our toil is an act of worship to the sovereign God Who gave it to us.

The other key word here is Joy. Christians often say that joy is a state of mind and separate from happiness. I hear “happiness requires a good circumstance but you can have joy anywhere”. This is not a distinction Solomon makes. Eating, drinking, having a party... this is happiness in the moment. Twice in this passage we have the word joy and once we have the word gladness. They are referring to the same thing. Just like Fear, Joy is an emotion. The thing about emotions is that we have no immediate control over them. They happen to us. When they happen, we have a choice in how we react. With fear, the correct choice is obedience. With joy, the correct choice is thankfulness, that is, to revel in the gifts God has presented to us. In other words, we are not to suppress, pass by, or ignore this precious gift of God. We are to allow ourselves to be “occupied with the gladness of our hearts.”

But what about when calamity happens? Eccl 7:14 “In the day of prosperity be happy,

But in the day of adversity consider—

God has made the one as well as the other

So that man will not discover anything that will be after him.”

Calamity feels so bad because of the contrast between it and the good times. That contrast is the reminder of our smokiness. First, we need to remember that God does give good gifts. This not only highlights the contrast, it actually helps to remember with gratitude. Second, recognize that God gives both. This is the point of Job. We are to accept God’s Sovereignty and trust in his Goodness. Third, we are to relinquish prediction and our false belief that we know the future. Calamity is a reminder that we are not God. Death is the ultimate calamity, which is why Solomon features it so heavily

in Ecclesiastes. It brings into stark realization that we will end and we know nothing about what will come after we do. To put a finer point on this, we only have what God gives us, and he does not give us mastery over time.

Solomon points out our place in time constantly throughout Ecclesiastes. Nowhere else in the Bible is a theology of time so clearly and completely given. All of God's gifts are given in the Present. Remember, smoke diffuses quickly and has an unpredictable trajectory. We neither remember the past or know the future. That last verse said, "For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart." We are to live rooted in the present, before God. We are not to live preoccupied with the Future or the Past, that is the way of worriers and workaholics. Now, there is a bad way to live in the present. Remember nihilistic hedonism, seeking pleasure because there is no meaning to life? That is living in the present the wrong way. Solomon labels such people as sluggards and fools. This is where I often fail. My abiding sin is laziness, seeking undeserved rest and pleasure by avoiding work. That is why I keep coming back to Ecclesiastes, to regain this perspective, that I am to live in the present seeking God and His gifts, both toil and joy. I love these words of God through Solomon because they have changed my life by showing me God's weight of glory and his great grace to keep giving me such wonderful gifts, even though I often spurn them.

At this point, we have the three interconnecting themes of Ecclesiastes. Together they answer the question of where do I fit? You are smoke, temporary with no real substance. God has the substance and weight of glory. God is the one who controls the future and elicits our fear and obedience. It can be hard to face that, but this is where you find rest. This is what gives you the freedom to mostly focus on the moment and the gifts God has specifically placed there for you. Forgetting these themes and losing perspective will only put weight on your shoulders as you struggle to do for yourself what only God can do, whether you're trying to control your future or create your own rewards. Listen to Eccl 9 and hear the rest you've been invited into.

⁷ Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. ⁸ Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. ⁹ Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.

¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

We do what is in front of us, because God is our boss and He put it there. It has His full approval. Let's pray:

Lord, God in heaven, we give you thanks for your words of comfort and truth. I ask that you remind us to live with full knowledge of our smokiness, in fear before you, obeying You and seeking Your gifts in this present time. In Jesus name, Amen.

Homework is to read Eccl at least once before next week, read the Screwtape letter number 15 by CSLewis on the back of your handout, and bring any questions you may have. If you want, you can also read Luke 12 and Psalm 23.