

Abiding Fruit

Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart

Vol. 2 No. 63

December 2, 2007

I Have Seen Everything...Under The Sun...All Is Vanity Ecclesiastes 1:14

Ecclesiastes has been called the black sheep of the canon of all the inspired books of Holy Scripture. It is the delight of skeptics and the despair of saints, as Bruce Waltke states. It was Horace who said, *“to wonder at nothing is almost the only thing which can make and keep a man happy.”* The Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem, seems to adopt this view. The Church seems to ignore this book. Rabbinic Judaism, as espoused by its founders the Rabbi’s Hillel and Shammai, doubted whether it should be in the Old Testament canon. To them, it seemed full of contradictions, skepticism and agnosticism. The writer (if it is Solomon) in Eccles. 12:10 points out, however, that he *“sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.”*

Derek Kidner argues that the author is a real citizen of a tantalizing world who feels keenly the injustices and disappointments of life and the futility that he so poignantly describes. He laments the passing of his youth and the all encompassing fact of death. The author desires that we do not fix our hearts on this futility and vanity, but that we accept and enjoy graciously from the hand of the Creator that which He so freely grants to us. In the Creator is eternity of which he has made us conscious.

Ecclesiastes demonstrates three major themes. There is first of all the use of the word **הֶבֶל** (*hebel*). This word means “vapor or breath.” It is used for “vanity” or “meaninglessness.” The second theme has to do with the author’s observation that it is necessary to “fear God.” The third theme paradoxically calls attention to the fact we should enjoy life because God has intended that we do so.

The theme of *“everything is vanity”* or a vapor (something intangible, seen for a moment, then gone) dominates the book. This word (*hebel*) occurs 37 times. Interestingly, the word, *“hebel”* also has the numerical value of 37 (h = 5; b = 2; l = 30). There are also 111 verses in each half of the book which is 3 times 37 (numerical value of *hebel*). The word *“vapor”* suggests an ethereal item. It is not so much that it is absolutely worthless or nothing, but rather that it is something. *Hebel* is used in the two halves of the book, firstly, as something that is temporal and fleeting, and in the second half, as something that is intellectually futile. A chasing after wind (KJV – vexation of spirit) suggests this fleeting aspect (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9). The word *“wind”* is the same Hebrew word for *“spirit.”* This chasing after wind or vexation of spirit vanishes after Eccles. 6:9, but is replaced with a questioning of what can man know or understand under the sun.

The first 6 chapters consider whether anything is good or can be good. The second 6 focus on whether we can know anything. The reality of death overshadows the author. At the end of life is the question of death. There are limitations in life and upon life. Death casts a shadow over all that we do and for the author causes everything to be *“hebel.”*

In view of this, it is understandable for the author to search for meaning. He looks at wisdom. He considers pleasure. He thinks about work and leisure. He ponders riches and power. He tries all of these contemporary symbols of the supposed good life, and finds all of them wanting – empty and having no substance (in the light of death).

It is right at this stage to turn to thoughts of God. The author seeks for meaning in life. He has used his experience as his source of knowledge and has found it vexatious and fleeting. It is important to note that the author, (even though he tries all these avenues that supposedly lead to happiness or contentment), never calls foolishness a good thing. Sprinkled throughout are references to God and the fact that we should fear God.

The phrase “*under the sun*” occurs almost 30 times and stands in contradistinction to God the Creator. It causes us to consider life that is not under the sun (is this death and afterwards?). We can picture life under the sun, but its constant refrain beckons to something else. Yes, life occurs under the sun (this is our human experience) but there is something else that occurs somewhere else.

The call to fear God points to that which is final and real in the midst of the author’s “vaporous” considerations. Under the sun moves to a consideration of heaven and the eye of God that sees all. In spite of the seeming absurdities of life, God has made everything beautiful in its time (3:11). The future maybe hidden to us, but it is certain because God holds it.

God’s judgment is therefore certain since any faith in ultimate justice implies faith in the wrath of God. Thus, everything “*under the sun*” does matter and is profoundly significant. This relevancy drives us to fear God. God is thus good to us, and this leads the author to consider that we should enjoy life to the full.

If you are going to eat, then eat with joy (9:7). The same applies to our drinking. Drink with a merry heart (9:7). A man should enjoy his wife because she is a gift from God (9:9). In other words, since you have life, enjoy it. Don’t fritter away your life thinking it is of no value. That would truly be vexatious.

Vanity of life for many means no hope, so therefore, we are told, “let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” This is the way of folly. Rather we should consider this vanity as that which leads us to the conclusion that we should enjoy life, not because there is no meaning, but because God the Creator has provided all good things for us to enjoy.

If you pursue wealth, power and pleasure as the end of life you will find at the end of life that you truly engaged in a chasing after wind. These things are empty in of themselves. Their true meaning is found in God. The enjoyment of life is a gift from God. Life is meant to be enjoyed because God gives it to us.

To enjoy life is not simply a choice we make – it is God’s gift to us. It is a Sovereign gift freely given. To despise it or not use it well is to deride God the Giver. Creative work that seems meaningful in time may turn out to be meaningless in death (as the author muses upon), yet God expects us to thankful in the present time for what we have and enjoy, therefore, all work ultimately is His gift to us for our benefit and enjoyment.

There are absurdities in life beyond us. There is grimness to life that sometimes seems unending and fruitless. God asks us to consider that He is faithful to us when we cannot comprehend all that is about us. Surely this is the way of faith. Not all may go well for us here and now, but God is faithful and in the end all will go well for us. We are called upon to enjoy life in the gracious fear of God. That time is now, not tomorrow or yesterday. Do this, fear God, enjoy what He has given, and the author has confidence that he can face God in the future.

The present moment is the proper time for us. Tomorrow holds that which we do not know. At this moment it is “hebel” to us. You cannot enjoy tomorrow today – it is impossible and folly. Jesus instructs us to not worry about tomorrow for we can do nothing about it (Matt. 6:31, 34). Rather, live for God today in the fear of God and enjoy His gifts day by day. Let James 4:14, 15 be your motto day by day. We are but a mist, but we can do the will of God and ought to seek it every day.