

Up in Smoke

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[0 : 00] Well, one of my friends has made a New Year's resolution. It is to read more challenging books. And I highly recommend the book of Ecclesiastes to her.

It's famous for being challenging, even a bit disturbing. One of the commentators I came across this week said, what the heck is this book doing in the Bible? We have chapter one open in front of you. The theme that's repeated throughout the book comes to us in the second verse. Very famous. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities.

All is vanity. And I suppose I should close with a prayer after saying that because that pretty well says it all. What's brilliant about this verse is the little Hebrew word for vanity.

It's the word hevel, hevel. It's very hard to pin down. Like our lives, it's elusive. So the very motto of the book gives us a taste of what the rest of the book is about.

[1 : 08] Hevel, vanity, means a breath. A mist. A vapour. What's passing? It's very like a candle.

This is hevel. When the candle is lit, it is beautiful.

It's real. It gives light. It gives warmth even. And then it's just smoke. It's vapour.

In fact, Eugene Peterson translates this verse, smoke. Nothing but smoke. There's nothing to anything. It's all smoke. That's hevel.

And our lives are just like that. They're real, beautiful, brief. Each of us is a whisper in the wind.

[2 : 11] Not substantial. Not solid. Small. Short lift. Hevel of hevels, says the preacher. Hevel of hevels.

Everything is hevel. Five times in one verse. And so what the writer does in Ecclesiastes is he gives himself over to a search. What's the essence of life?

What's the flame? What's the smoke of life? And why is it hard to enjoy life? And so he throws himself into building things and enjoying things, the good life, the successful life.

And at the end of it, he says, everything is hevel, vapour, breath, smoke. After you've done it all, after you've seen it all, life itself slips through your fingers.

There's nothing that really satisfies. Everything is just emptiness and smoke. Happiness itself is elusive. We don't understand life.

[3 : 13] We work in vain. We stress in vain. And when we die, we leave absolutely everything behind. This is the drumbeat of the book, 38 times, hevel, hevel, vanity, vanity.

And he's not cynical and he's not sarcastic. He's not contemptuous of anything in life. What Ecclesiastes does is it gives us a massive dose of reality.

And it's completely honest with us about our fragility, our frustration, and our futility. And it keeps dashing our sentimental, empty optimisms on the rocks of hevel.

I think it's probably better said this way. Ecclesiastes is God's gift to us. And it has the ministry of debunking. We keep pretending we're in control, that we understand how the world works.

And Ecclesiastes comes along like a broom and goes, you don't. And I say this because the Bible's not always comfortable. In fact, it's often distinctly uncomfortable, unsettling.

[4 : 26] And it mirrors the complexities of our experience. It's not a neat and tidy book. Otherwise, we'd just make a list and a summary and tick it off and imagine we'd had it under control.

But what we're doing is we're hearing the straight truth from the Bible. And that can be very difficult for us. Because we have dreams of what we think life could be or should be.

And the reality of hevel keeps undermining our dreams. And the choice becomes whether I'm devoted to my delusions or whether I hear the truth. And whether I prefer the truth or what God says.

Some people get around this difficulty of Ecclesiastes and hevel by saying that the writer is pretending to be an atheist. Having a very bad hair day.

Getting up out of the wrong side of bed. And they take that from the little phrase, under the sun. Which is used 29 times in the book. As though the author is saying, well, if you remove God from the picture, life is filled with hevel, vanity and smokiness.

[5 : 32] And then in the last chapter, he just whips God out in chapter 12. And then everything is all sunny again. But to take that view misses the point of the book. The reality of vanity, fleetingness and elusiveness of life is not just restricted to those who do not believe in God.

We believers have to struggle with hevel as well. And it doesn't suddenly magically disappear when you come to faith in God. That's the point of the first verse.

Ecclesiastes 1.1. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. This book comes out of the center of the Old Testament church.

The preacher has the official responsibility of teaching God's people when they gather. We're told that he's descended from David, that he's a king in Jerusalem.

He couldn't be closer to the heart of Israel's faith. But it's interesting, isn't it? We're never told his name throughout the book. It's like he's erased his footsteps because he wants to remain elusive.

[6 : 41] And the reason for that is he wants to focus on the words, the words of the preacher. If you have a Bible with you, flip it over to chapter 12 because the book ends in exactly the same way as it starts.

In chapter 12, in verse 10, we read, The preacher sought to find words of delight. And uprightly he wrote words of truth.

The words of the wise are like goads, nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings given by the one shepherd. And then he comes to our memory verse.

The end of the matter, all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments. What this means is that Hevel is not just something negative that we have to put up with.

It's telling us that God himself is behind Hevel. The vanity, the meaninglessness. Hevel has been imposed by God as a result of humanity's fall into sin.

[7 : 44] And God is at work in and through Hevel. But being a believer doesn't give you a free pass from Hevel. And this is the gift of Ecclesiastes to debunk every worldview that doesn't take Hevel seriously.

And that's why the preacher says, I've tried to find words of delight and truth. Words that have real and lasting satisfaction and pleasure. Not just a jumble of scattered thoughts.

And they're written straightforwardly. I'm trying to give straight talk. And then we hear, The words of Ecclesiastes are like goads. A goad is a stick that a shepherd uses to keep his sheep from jumping into danger.

And as you read Ecclesiastes, this is the experience. They're like pokey words. So let me give you a taster. Here are some pokey words from Ecclesiastes.

You shouldn't expect lasting satisfaction from anything in this life. All the money, sex and power in the world is not going to give you lasting satisfaction. Life is not about believing in yourself and living the dream.

[8 : 50] You will not find justice in this world. Life is not fair. You are not going to make a significant impact on the world. You're not even going to really understand the world or be in control.

Pokey words. But the words are also fixed nails given by the one shepherd. And I think the one shepherd is God himself. And they're fixed nails because they're strong enough for us to hang our lives on.

Because the path to joy comes through accepting hevel. And living a God with life, to fear God and obey his commandments, is the life of joy.

And we're going to see in the coming weeks. The key to joy is bringing hevel and faith in God together. If God is our sovereign creator, the way to live well is not to desperately try and control your future or to nail everything down or even just to abandon it and say, eat, drink and marry because tomorrow we die.

It's to get over ourselves and recognize that we are not God and to take joy in the gifts that he has given us and leave the control to him.

[10 : 03] I want to show you how this works in chapter 1, verses 3 to 15. The preacher makes two points. And the first point I've called hevel and earth, verses 3 to 11.

It's a poem of great beauty, verses 3 to 11. It begins and ends with human experience. And in the middle, verses 5 to 7, shows that our experience is reflected in the physical creation.

He starts with the question of gain. He says, what is the gain? What is the surplus? What is the real reward of all our work?

What return do we have after all our work? Verse 3, what does man gain by all his toil at which he toils under the sun? Toil is drudgery, sweat work, grinding, full of trouble and sorrow and difficulty. An echo of God's sentence on man and woman in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. And the preacher is putting before us a very sensible question.

[11:09] What do you gain by all your exertion and anxiety and hard work, sleepless nights? And the answer is nothing.

We desperately try to impose ourselves on reality, thinking we can manipulate the world or manage our lives, that we'll make something solid and lasting with ourselves.

It's grasping at wind. It's hevel. It's smokiness. It's chasing the air. All our attempts to reduce the world to cash values are fruitless.

All those things that take up so much time and energy, assets and achievements and amusements. They're fleeting. They're vapour. All our progress in technology, it's hevel.

It's vanity. It leaves no surplus. I'm now a grandfather. And so I'm reading these kinds of books right now. This is a children's book by Dr. Seuss.

[12:08] And on one of the pages in this wonderful book, we meet a man called Mr. Bix. And Mr. Bix's job is to look after a machine called a bawthin.

And every time the bawthin machine just runs down. Let me read you this page. Poor Mr. Bix, every morning at six, poor Mr. Bix has his bawthin to fix.

It doesn't seem fair. It just doesn't seem right. But his bawthin just seems to go schlump in the night. It schlumps in a heap, sadly needing repair.

Bix figures it's due to the local night air. It takes him all day to unshlump it. And then the night air comes back and it schlumps once again.

So don't you feel blue. Don't get down in the dumps. You're lucky you don't have a bawthin that schlumps. But the problem is we do.

[13:12] And every one of our bawthins schlump. And the older you get, the more difficult it is to unshlump your bawthin in the morning. And our children, they all have bawthins.

And all their bawthins will schlump and the next generation and the next generation after that. And this sense of endless turnover without really moving forward, it's reflected in the natural world, verses 5 and 6.

The sun rises and goes down and hastens to the place where it rises. The word hasten means puffing, exhausted, panting.

But it still ends up in exactly the same place. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north. Around and around goes the wind and its circuit of wind returns. It's a relentless cycle around and around and around.

It's the same with the water cycle. You know, in the sea, the water condenses, forms clouds, moves over the land. It rains down, goes into rivers, goes into the sea. And the preacher says in verse 7, the sea never gets full.

[14:19] It's exactly the same with our desires, our ears and our eyes, verses 8 and 9. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

What has been is what will be and what has been done is what will be done. There's nothing new under the sun. And when we get to chapter 3, we find out that God put eternity into our hearts. We have these enormous desires. And we feed our eyes and we feed our ears, but they are never filled. We're always looking for the new thing.

The latest sound, the latest video, the latest TikTok, the latest text, the latest Netflix, the latest iPhone. And you can gorge yourself on your favourite content for 24 hours a day and 7 days a week, but your eyes and your ears will not be satisfied.

They'll keep wanting to see more and hear more. And that's why the preacher says there's nothing new in this sense. There's nothing new enough to break this cycle, to bring lasting satisfaction.

[15:27] There's nothing new enough to remove Hevel, to give us the kind of rest that we need to stop us wanting more. Because every time and everything we hook our eyes and ears to in this world is passing, transient, Hevel.

And then the poem finishes in verse 11 with the one thing that we do know, but we don't really believe it. We find it impossible to come to terms with. And it's not just that each one of us will die.

It's no one will remember you. In verse 11, there's no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet among those who come after.

A friend of mine in the East has a brother who made a lot of money. He was very wealthy and made a lot of people wealthy who invested with him. He endowed a chair at Harvard.

And Tommy told me that his brother died and everyone remembered him at the funeral. But within two weeks, everyone had moved on. We're a whisper in the wind.

[16:37] Like a candle, we're here for a moment. We shine brightly and then we're gone and forgotten. And that writes Hevel over everything we do.

And that's the first point. Hevel and earth. The writer moves in a different direction now. And there's a second point in verses 12 to 15.

And I've called this Hevel and heaven. It's a great help to us in verse 13 that we have the first reference to heaven. Because although we live under the sun, we don't live only under the sun.

We also live under heaven. And what that means is although we can't put it all together, God does.

And although we can't see the moral order in this world and in our lives, God does.

And we cannot make anything solid and lastingly satisfying, but God can and does. And whenever the preacher tells us throughout the rest of the book of Ecclesiastes that we can't really understand life, he also tells us that God does.

[17:50] He also tells us that God does and that he is working this world and working our lives towards what is good and what is beautiful. And that's why he calls us to follow God and that's why he calls us to follow God and to fear him.

In fact, this is the reason why God has placed the world under Hevel. He's far more interested in whether we trust him than whether we have the feeling of being in control of our lives.

And that's why the preacher uses the language of gift and giving in verse 13. The God of Ecclesiastes is the God of grace.

We don't understand all his gifts, but he still gives. And this is where joy begins. As we begin to learn to receive that all we have comes from the good hand of God and to hold those things with an open hand, knowing we can trust him, that begins joy.

And although our work and our toil are marked by vanity and Hevel like a vapor, if we give up trying to control it and play God with it and receive it from the hand of God, it can mean joy and pleasure.

[19:05] Just look down at chapter 2, verse 24. The writer says, There's nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.

This, I saw, also is from the hand of God, for apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment? See, the big question is whether we attach our desires and longings to anything in this world or to God.

And it's not just that God gives us the ability to enjoy his good gifts. It's as we hold the good gifts before God, as Hevel, that we're able to enjoy them.

It's when we see our lives and the achievements of our lives as candle smoke and as gifts of God at the same time, it enables pleasure.

Jesus said something very similar to this, didn't He, in Matthew 16. Remember, He says, What will it profit you if you gain the whole world and forfeit your soul? You could make YouTube clips once a week for a year, every one of them going viral, having billions of hits.

[20:17] You could get a fantastic amount of money and give it to charities and win every award and still lose your soul. It's a similar point. Chapter 8, the writer says in verse 15, I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

The preacher does, he faces us with this temptation to find our satisfaction here under the sun. But we're made for God, we're wired for God.

And it's only when we attach our desires to Him that we can truly enjoy this heavily life. If we try and make our way without God, every pleasure, every amusement, every achievement does nothing but palliate our real desire for God.

Everything in this life will ultimately disappoint you and let you down. Every person, the satisfaction will slip between your fingers.

It's a tragedy to hook our infinite desires for God on anything less than Him. And I need to finish. I want to come back to this next week.

[21 : 38] What does it mean for us today? I mean, what difference does it mean for us to live this side of Jesus Christ? Does the coming of Jesus and His death and resurrection mean that we can just put Hevel behind us?

And the answer is that His coming into the world does not cancel Hevel, but it clarifies and changes it for us.

Let me read to you from the book of Romans, chapter 8, these verses, where the Apostle Paul himself uses the Hevel word. He says, That's the creation.

The whole creation waits with eager longing for the revelation of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility.

That's the Greek word used for Hevel in the Old Testament. Not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope, speaking about God.

[22 : 35] That the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

And not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly as we eagerly await for the adoption of sons, the redemption of our bodies, in this hope we were saved. Yes, the New Testament clarifies. God Himself subjected creation to futility. The frustration, the fragility of our lives, the elusiveness of life and our toil is imposed by God as a result of sin in Genesis 3.

So the painful reality of Hevel remains, but it is changed. Changed from just being the pain of weariness and lack of understanding to something more like the pain of childbirth, which is filled with hope, hope of deliverance.

And since Christ has come, there is something genuinely new in this world, in creation. In Jesus, God is doing something new.

[24 : 00] Through Him, He has made a new covenant in His blood. He has given us a new birth and new life, which arises from the tomb with the body of the risen Jesus.

He makes us into new creatures. He gives us new hearts. He gives us a new hope of a new creation as He makes all things new.

The problem is we still play the pretend game. And we pretend to ourselves, if only I get through this next month, I'll be okay. If only I find that right life partner, I'll be satisfied.

If only I can just get the vaccine. If only the kids leave home and find their feet, I'll be happy. But these words of Ecclesiastes are God's words for us until our bodies are raised from the dead.

And it is possible now in this life to receive all we have from the hands of God, both prosperity and adversity. Because they are not just good gifts from our good Father in heaven.

[25 : 05] They are signs that He is the one who can fill our eyes and fill our ears with glory. Until this whole world is filled with the knowledge of His glory as the waters cover the sea.

Amen. Now Caitlin's going to... So let's approach this new challenge as we may do something a real time. I think there are many things that He is loving God's words in heaven. So our audience in the countries of Israel can be able to achieve passion for his life.

Ame Martin and Joar Kardashiers them