

The Bible Jesus Used

A Gospel-Centered Glance at
the Old Testament

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“Life is profitless, totally absurd. This oppressive message lies at the heart of the Bible’s strangest book. Enjoy life if you can, advises the author, for old age will soon overtake you. And even as you enjoy, know that the world is meaningless. Virtue does not bring reward. The deity stands distant, abandoning humanity to chance and death. These views contrast radically with earlier teachings expressed in the book of Proverbs....”

—James L. Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, 23)

“He is searching, confused, contradictory, cynical, and his conclusion is very clear.... ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’ ... Life under the sun is purposeless, meaningless, empty, and pointless.... Qoheleth is a tricky figure to understand.... Here is someone who is just frankly confused. He gets some stuff right, and he also gets some stuff wrong. He has strengths and weaknesses.... Good at seeing through the superficialities of life; good at seeing the vanity and contradictions of our existence; but bad at finding meaning and redemption.”

—Kevin DeYoung (*Sermon Series on “Ecclesiastes”*)

Introduction

❖ Fatalist or realist/godly sage?

- ❖ Rom 8:20–21. For the creation was subjected to *futility/frustration*, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ 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.

❖ The Title and Voices

- ❖ **Qoheleth** (1:1–2; 12:8–9) = “The Assembler”
 - ❖ KJV, NASB, ESV = “The Preacher”
 - ❖ NIV, NRSV, HCSB = “The Teacher”
- ❖ **Frame narrator**

Ecclesiastes at a Glance

Prologue (Eccl 1:1)

Qoheleth's Queries (1:2–12:8)	A –Indicative Moto: All is <i>Hebel</i> (1:2)	Part 1
	B –Introductory Poem (1:3–11)	
	C –Qoheleth's Investigation of Life (1:12–6:9)	
	C' –Qoheleth's Conclusions of Life (6:10–11:6)	Part 2
	B' –Concluding Poem (11:7–12:7)	
	A' –Indicative Moto: All is <i>Hebel</i> (12:8)	
Epilogue (12:9–14)		

❖ The Meaning of *Hebel*

❖ Overview:

❖ 38x in the book

❖ Base meaning: “wisp of air, breath, vapor”

❖ 4 potential categories: “Meaninglessness,” “absurdity,” “fleetingness,” “enigma.”

❖ The use of refrains and the fact that *all is hebel* seem to require the same meaning for all 38 occurrences.

❖ Eccl 1:2 (ESV): Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

❖ Eccl 12:8 (ESV): Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

❖ **Types of things that are *hebel*:**

❖ **Human behavior:**

❖ Toil and its products (2:11; 2:18–26; 4:4, 7–8, 15–16; 5:10; 6:1–2)

❖ Pleasure (2:1; 6:9)

❖ Wisdom and growing wise (2:15; 7:15–16)

❖ Words (5:6–7; 6:10–11)

❖ **Living beings and times in their lives** (3:18–19; 6:12; 7:15–16; 9:9; 11:10)

❖ **Divine behavior—events**

❖ Divine justice (2:15, 26; 6:1–2; 8:10, 14)

❖ “Everything” (1:2, 14; 2:17; 6:3–4; 11:8–9; 12:8)

- ❖ **“Meaninglessness, vanity, futility”** (Kidner, Longman)

All things in this world are worthless, purposeless, or profitless.

- ❖ **Following the Vulgate’s *vanitas*, it’s the main rendering in English translations:**
 - ❖ KJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV: **“vanity”**
 - ❖ HCSB, NET: **“futility”**
 - ❖ NIV: **“meaningless”**
 - ❖ CEB: **“pointless”**
 - ❖ BBE: **“no purpose”**
- ❖ **Easily fits some contexts (e.g., 2:1, 11, 19, 21).**

❖ “Absurdity, irrationality,
senselessness” (Garrett)

**All things in this world are counter-
rational or a violation of reason.**

❖ **Weaknesses with “meaningless” or “asburd”:**

- ❖ Common synonyms are missing: “nothing, naught,” “empty, idle, worthless,” “emptiness,” “worthless, without result,” “nothingness.”
- ❖ Some things are *better than* others (3:22; 4:9; 5:1; 7:1–3, 5, 8, 10; 9:4, 16–18).
- ❖ If all is “meaningless” or “absurd,” the Preacher’s own words are empty or counter-rational and should not be listened to.
- ❖ The Preacher affirmed deep meaning in life, for he felt pain and believed truth and rightness could be thwarted: “evil, trouble” (9:3), “grievous evil” (5:13, 16; 6:2), “great evil” (2:21), “unhappy business” (1:13; 4:18).

- ❖ **Fleetingness, transience, temporariness, ephemerality (Fredericks)**

All things in this are brief.

- ❖ **Easily fits some contexts (2:15; 3:19; 6:12).**

❖ **Weaknesses:**

❖ **The Preacher addresses life's brevity and unchanging cycles of "every matter under heaven" (3:1; cf. 1:4–11; 3:1–8; 12:2–7) in order to identify its enigmatic nature.**

❖ **Eccl 3:11**. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

❖ **Eccl 8:17**. I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out.

- ❖ **As the Preacher describes life's unhappy business, it portrays an existence anything but temporary.**
- ❖ The Preacher says of the workaholic, there is “no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, ‘For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?’ This also is *hebel* and an unhappy business” (4:8).
- ❖ The leaving of one's wealth to another who never worked for it is not simply *hebel* (2:19, 21, 23) but a “great evil” (2:21) that leads to a lifetime of “sorrow” and “vexation,” “despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun” (2:20, 23). Why despair if all is so brief?

- ❖ **Enigma, mystery, incomprehensibility, ungraspability** (Ogden, Caneday, McCain, DeRouchie)

All things in this world are not fully in humanity's power to comprehend.

- ❖ Eccl 11:7–8. Light is sweet [**not meaningless, absurd**], and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. So if a person lives many years [**far from brief**], let him rejoice in them all [**not meaningless, absurd**]; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is *enigma*.

- ❖ **“All if *hebel*” means nothing in the universe this side of eternity is fully understandable, whether good or bad.**
- ❖ **Eccl 1:17–18**. I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.
- ❖ **Eccl 3:11**. He has made everything beautiful in his time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s hearts, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

- ❖ **Eccl 6:12**. For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his *enigmatic* life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun? Cf. 8:7.
- ❖ **Eccl 8:17**. I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.
- ❖ **Eccl 11:5**. As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

- ❖ **While we can know some truths, many realities “under the sun” make life “wearisome” at best (1:8):**
 - ❖ Life and nature’s repetitive nature (1:4–7, 9–10)
 - ❖ The soul’s inability to be satisfied (1:8)
 - ❖ The failure of every new generation to learn from the past (1:11).
- ❖ **The identification of many “evils” in the world (1:13; 2:21; 4:8; 5:13; 6:2) all point to something painful, traumatic, or frustrating.**

❖ **The parallel phrase supports life's ungraspability:**

- ❖ **Eccl 1:14**. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is *hebel* and a striving after wind.
- ❖ **Eccl 2:11**. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was *hebel* and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.
- ❖ **Eccl 2:17**. So I hated life, because what was done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is *hebel* and a striving after wind.
- ❖ Cf. Eccl 1:17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9.

❖ The curse and our good Shepherd

❖ Ecclesiastes is “under the sun” theology.

- ❖ There is no lasting gain “under the sun” (Eccl 1:3; 2:11), for death comes to all (6:12; 9:6).
- ❖ Nothing new happens “under the sun” (1:9).
- ❖ All that is done “under the sun” is *hebel* (1:14; 4:7), and because of this it is grievous (1:17).
- ❖ “Under the sun” there are corruptions (3:16), oppressions (4:1), evil deeds (4:3), and grievous evil (5:13; 6:1; 9:3; 10:5).

- ❖ All life as we know it happens “under the sun” (4:15; 9:9) as a gift of God (5:18; 8:15):
 - ❖ Toils, labors, and deeds (1:18–20; 5:18; 8:9; 9:6, 9)
 - ❖ Joy (8:15)
 - ❖ Time and chance (9:11)
 - ❖ Wisdom (9:13)
- ❖ Mankind cannot discern all God’s work “under the sun” (8:17; cf. 7:13–14).

- ❖ **Everyone, believer and non-believer alike, is part of life “under the sun,” and in this world *all is hebel* (1:2; 12:8; cf. 1:14; 4:7).**
- ❖ **Rom 8:20–21**. For the creation was subjected to *futility* [enigma?], not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ 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.

- ❖ **God controls life under the sun; he is the one who has made it both crooked and beyond our grasp of understanding.**
- ❖ **Ecc1 1:15**. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.
- ❖ **Ecc1 7:13**. Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?
- ❖ **Ecc1 8:17**. Then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.

- ❖ **God does things the way he does *so that* we will fear him.**
- ❖ Eccl 3:11, 14. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what god has done from the beginning to the end. . . . ¹⁴ I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.

❖ **Those who can't “shepherd” must turn to the One Shepherd.**

❖ **Ecc1 1:14**. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is *enigma* and a shepherding of wind.

❖ **Ecc1 12:11**. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by One Shepherd.

- ❖ **Even in a world that doesn't make sense, the call of our lives is clear.**
- ❖ **Ecc1 12:13**. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.