
Is All Really Vanity?

Finding Meaning in Ecclesiastes

David Gibson*

God the protector of all that trust in thee,
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy;
increase and multiply upon us thy mercy;
that thou being our ruler and guide,
we may so pass through things temporal, that we finally lose not
the things eternal:
Grant this heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake our Lord.
Amen.

—The Collect, Fourth Sunday after Trinity

In his famous sermon “Learning in War-Time,” C. S. Lewis wrestled profoundly with the relationship between things temporal and things eternal. The particular pressure point in his context was the advent of the Second World War. How should his students make sense of the pursuit of academic pleasures—what Lewis called “placid occupations”—while Europe was poised on the precipice of so great a conflict? Lewis engaged the question by widening its lens, dramatically broadening the scope from the immediate danger to the more remote but greatest reality of all: judgment by the living God. If learning in wartime may be compared to Nero fiddling while Rome burned, then “to a Christian the true tragedy of Nero must be not that he fiddled while the city was on fire but that he fiddled on the brink of hell.”¹ In other words, Lewis suggested, the real question is this:

* David Gibson (PhD, University of Aberdeen) is the minister of Trinity Church, Aberdeen, where he lives with his wife, Angela, and four young children. He is the author of *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End*.

1 C. S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: MacMillan, 1949), 48.

How should we make sense of anything at all in our present, bodily, earthly lives while the yawning chasm of eternity waits for us beyond the grave?

Widening the lens often changes everything. It's not that our questions and challenges disappear; rather, they come into sharper focus. When we're asking about the meaning of life, about whether anything matters, about why we should love and be loved if one day we will die, and about how we can continue to put one step in front of another when grief and pain threaten to suffocate our very lives, then the need for a big picture that is both true and beautiful is very urgent indeed.

I want to suggest that Lewis's technique follows the skillful Teacher in Ecclesiastes, who helps us pass through things temporal with wisdom and wit, precisely because he has seen the weight of things eternal. Ecclesiastes is the book in the Bible that asks some of the biggest questions in life but perplexes us with its seemingly unorthodox and impenetrable answers. "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (Eccles. 1:2–3). The key to answering this question is seeing how the Teacher helps us to pass through things temporal ("under the sun") that we finally lose not things eternal ("[God] has put eternity into man's heart," 3:11).

INTERPRETIVE MISSTEPS

Following the Teacher's message is not an easy task in a book as foreign to us as Ecclesiastes. Many Christian interpreters go astray in coming to terms with the unusual voice with which this devout Teacher of wisdom speaks. Let me suggest three common mistakes that deafen us to the sermon about reality that Ecclesiastes is preaching. I then will outline four key emphases from the book's big picture that both widen the lens and sharpen the focus of the book's message.

Shape of the Book

The first misstep has to do with the shape of the whole book. Tremper Longman III, for instance, observes that the prologue (1:1–11) and the epilogue (12:8–14)

are both written in the third person, marking a clear stylistic difference from the main body of the book made up of autobiographical reflections (1:12–12:7). For Longman, this main section contains stark observations about God, life, and death that are in explicit conflict with the wisdom traditions of Israel, so much so that the Teacher's God "is distant, occasionally indifferent, and sometimes cruel."² This unorthodox perspective is countered and corrected by the epilogue, which, together with the prologue, provides a frame around the book that shapes how we should read the whole. The normative teaching of the book is 12:9–14, and this frame narration is there to correct and redeem the autobiographical narration.

Longman's view should not be quickly dismissed. For one thing, there is precedent for the presence of unorthodox views within individual books of the Bible, such as Job's comforters (an example Longman himself uses in support of his position). Longman's viewpoint arises from trying to take very seriously indeed the bleakness of several parts of Ecclesiastes.

There are serious problems, however, with his overall reading of the book. We should note that the prologue (1:1–11) is only awkwardly subsumed within a schema which sets the main body in contrast to the frame narrator sections; although the opening verses may be poetically beautiful, taken on their own they are as bleak and negative as much else in the book and hardly "correct" the autobiographical section. Furthermore, as Longman himself accepts, his view requires a strong reinterpretation of the epilogue as damning the Teacher with only faint praise and strong criticism, a view which is rather hard to sustain on a straightforward reading of the epilogue, where the Teacher's words are described as delightful and embodying the wisdom of a shepherd (12:10–11).

The main flaw in Longman's proposal, however, is his own admission that many positive passages in the main body appear right alongside the most negative passages (2:24–26; 3:12–14, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10). For Longman, these offer only "a limited type of joy," connected as they are to eating, drinking, and

2 Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 35.

work³—and it is precisely this evaluation of joy that, I suggest, says more about our modern location than the biblical worldview of the wisdom literature. For Longman’s Teacher, temporal pleasures only lighten the burden of a meaningless existence. But might the Teacher have some kind of wide-angle lens that allows him to hold together the kind of things we think are irreconcilable? I think he does.

“Under the Sun”

A second wrong turn with Ecclesiastes is to misunderstand one of its key phrases: “under the sun.” We read the words “under the sun” (1:3, 14) and we think *spatially*: we split the world into below and above. We take the meaning to be that under the sun everything is a certain way, but above the sun it’s different; below is the world lived without God and without the Lord Jesus, above the sun is life lived with him. This way of reading Ecclesiastes can be linked to a very wooden Christology, the kind of worldview that says life without Jesus is awful (under the sun) but life with Jesus is wonderful (above the sun). If we live the way God intends, and if we see the world from his vantage point, then we can be spared the nihilism of the under-the-sun perspective.

I think this is to misread this key phrase. Rather than thinking spatially, we should think chronologically. In the ancient world, and in Scripture, the sun marked time more than space. “The phrase ‘under the sun’ . . . refers to a *now* rather than a *there*.”⁴ “Under the sun” points to *these* days, now—as long as the earth lasts, in this period of time, this is just how things are. One day the sun will be no more; we will live in a new creation, a new world order. But for now, the Teacher is simply commenting on what this temporal life is like. Pastorally, it’s so important to realize this is true. Coming to Christ as Savior and Lord doesn’t change the under-the-sun existence. Many embrace Christ in difficulty and walk the way of the cross to *increased* suffering and heartache this side of eternity. We live under the sun today, but we will live in glory tomorrow.

3 Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 34.

4 Peter J. Leithart, *Solomon among the Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 69.

Vanity of Vanities?

The third misstep happens when we move from the big picture and crucial phrases to key words, and none is more open to misunderstanding in Ecclesiastes than the word “vanity,” or “meaningless.” This word recurs throughout and is the main cry of the Teacher as he looks at life: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” In my own reading, I have followed interpreters such as Iain D. Provan, who challenges the idea that the Hebrew word *hebel* carries the main meaning in Ecclesiastes of existential meaninglessness. With that connotation, the book becomes a bleak discourse on the emptiness of life.

In contrast to this, however, Provan (and others) point out that elsewhere in the Old Testament, *hebel* means “breath,” “breeze,” “mist,” or “vapour,” and thus the metaphorical application is to things that are insubstantial and fleeting rather than to actions that are in vain or have no purpose.⁵ “O LORD, what is man that you regard him, or the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath [*hebel*]; his days are like a passing shadow” (Ps. 144:3–4). This means that in using this word, nearly always, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes is pointing to how life comes and goes in the blink of an eye, and he is exploring what that *feels* like when one considers both all the beauty and all the brokenness of the world. He is musing, deeply and disturbingly, on life’s repetitiveness, life’s brevity, life’s elusiveness, the quickness of things to slip through our fingers, and all in the light of an eternity belonging to a God who will judge the living and the dead. “The book of Ecclesiastes is a meditation on what it means for our lives to be like a whisper spoken in the wind: here one minute, and carried away forever the next.”⁶

If this perspective is right, then Ecclesiastes becomes a jolt to our spiritual systems, a cleaning of our damaged spectacles for looking at the world. We get a new and maybe entirely unexpected perspective on ourselves, our joys, and our sorrows, and the way God has made the world to work. In Anthony Thiselton’s lovely phrase, God gave us the wisdom literature to “wound from

5 Iain D. Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 52.

6 David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 20.

behind.⁷ We are left blinking in surprise, and, as we get our bearings, the world looks different. On the other hand, if the missteps outlined above are pursued with vigor—as they often are, in the pulpit or the classroom—the result is a view of the created order that sees it all as vanity, temporal things as mere weightless distractions from the truly spiritual reality of life in Christ.

PAINFUL, DELIGHTFUL WORDS

So what might it look like to read Ecclesiastes differently? In a similar way to Longman, I believe the epilogue does indeed function as a hermeneutical key to the book because of the way the closing verses explicitly comment on what has gone before. In contrast to Longman, however, I suggest that these verses do not correct the autobiography so much as give us a theological framework through which to hold together things temporal and things eternal. There is a way of looking at what joy is and of looking at what God does in pain, and a way of looking at today in the light of tomorrow, that helps us to see that the wisdom of the wise is found in the most unexpected of places. Note how Ecclesiastes is able to say that the Teacher's words are both delightful (12:10) and painful (v. 11)—our task is to inhabit the world in such a way that we can comprehend how one book is *both* these things.

Consider the following four emphases in the epilogue that give us this big picture.

Pleasure

“The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth” (12:10). This is an invitation to take up a hermeneutical lens for the whole book: it contains words of truth and beauty. Ecclesiastes should delight us. God is not a killjoy in the way he made the world, nor is he puritanical (in the common use of that word) in the words he gave us to read that tell us about himself. It's one thing to say you need to remember God before the day of trouble and

7 Anthony C. Thiselton, “Wisdom in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures: The Hebrew Bible and Judaism,” *Theology* 114.3 (May/June 2011): 163–72 (165).

old age, but it's quite another thing to tell us so in the words of beautiful poetry in chapter 12: remember him “before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern” (v. 6). The poetry presses the poignancy. Old age is like a once-great house, now given over to disrepair. In a powerful collection of metaphors and allusions, we are treated to a picture of sad degeneration and decline from what once was, the very point being to show us that “in the brave struggle to survive there is almost a more pointed reminder of decay than in a total ruin.”⁸

This description of old age comes at the end of the book and is introduced with creation imagery that echoes Genesis 1, but now in reverse: the light-givers of the universe are going dark (Eccles. 12:2). It is “the unmaking of creation” to portray how, just as God made everyone, so in death every person is unmade.⁹ This is the climax to a book that opens so powerfully with creation imagery, where the earth, sun, wind, and streams all feature in a beautiful lyrical tilt intended by its very form to evoke the seasons and rhythms of the world, the stage on which human beings take their place for such a short space of time (1:2–7). In this world, humanity comes to learn, often the hard way, that there are seasons for everything, and we ignore this part of our createdness at our peril (3:1–8). I suggest that the writer is working on a thesis about the goods of created matter and created time, which can be received as gifts even by fallen human beings *precisely because* they delimit our idolatrous attempts to be like God in living forever. It is a *blessing* to learn that we will come and go but the earth will remain, and we learn this in poetry.

It is a delight to discover the Bible is like this: the truth of the words' content is bound up in the beauty of the words' form. It is one thing to be told what marriage is as the union of a man and a woman, but another altogether to be given a ballad that expresses what it is like to be in love and to make love (Song of Songs). It is one thing to be told that we will soon die, but another altogether to

8 Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 102.

9 Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, 213–14.

learn through Ecclesiastes that “the lot we’ve been given cannot flourish without attention to the seasons that roll through.”¹⁰

Pain

But in Ecclesiastes, pleasure is mingled with pain. “The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd” (12:11). Goads were used by drivers in the ancient world to keep animals on a straight path: if the animal went to the left, there’s pain; if it went to the right, there’s pain. The only way to not have pain is to walk the direction the Shepherd dictates.

Some of the words in Ecclesiastes come to us with sharp tips. It’s as if the writer is saying that if we really do want to remember our Creator in the days of our youth (12:1), then our hearts and minds will need to throb a little. So he gives us some words to make us sit up and take notice—words to stop us in our tracks, turn us around, and get us going in the right direction.

Consider 7:1: “A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.” What? Can that really be right? We wince as the goad pierces. God has set death as the limit on our days, the punishment for our proud rebellion. We know we will die, *but we live as if we will not*. So the Teacher sets about his task of bringing right up close and personal our own death, which we prefer to keep at arm’s length and pretend will one day happen to someone else. In Ecclesiastes, we learn that all our disappointments in life are reminders of death, all our sorrows are echoes of the one great specter that fills the earth with futility. Death stalks and claims its prey without discretion. Our tears are real. Our grief can be unending.

This much we know is true—but what the Teacher sees is that death has a positive power if we accept this certain presence long in advance of its arrival. Death can be the very thing that stops us expecting too much from the things that turn out only to disappoint us. Death can be the very thing that makes us

¹⁰ Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), 118.

stop and savor a moment that would otherwise have passed us by—a moment at a table spread with food, in the presence of our spouse (9:7–10), in the company of our family (4:8), in the blessedness of work that satisfies both mind and body and creates wealth for the good of others (4:9). All is vanity only when we think all is all there is. If all is there because God put it there for now, for today, for me to use for others and for him, then in fact things eternal are shaping how we hold things temporal.¹¹

Perspective

This is all, clearly, a change of perspective on these days under the sun. We grieve, as all grieve, but not as those without hope. We groan, like the Lord Jesus himself (Mark 7:31–37; 8:12) and like the apostle Paul (Rom. 8:22–23), but we groan in hope. For our perspective is this: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccles. 12:13).

This doesn’t come naturally to us. We have hopes and dreams and aims and ambitions, and in the midst of that we think of our responsibilities to others: to spouses, children, parents, work colleagues, friends. But the Teacher tells us that every single duty or responsibility I have toward anyone else I have toward God first and foremost. Far from being nihilistic throughout the whole book, the Teacher is rather endorsing the same worldview espoused by Moses and the Lord Jesus himself that what God requires is love and obedience toward him and love for neighbor as ourselves—this is simply what it means to be a created being. We think it means having all the answers and knowing why we hurt and why we lose, but in fact I was made to fear God, not to be God.

And what gives us our true perspective on time is not time itself but eternity.

Preparation

In Ecclesiastes, eternity invades the present with the hope of judgment. “God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or

11 See Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2018).

evil” (12:14). Judgment can be a promise or a predicament, a hope or a fear, all depending on how we approach it. It seems to me that Ecclesiastes harmonizes with the biblical theme of judgment as a reason for jubilation, the hope of a world restored, causing that world itself to break out beyond its physical restraints in exultant praise (Psalm 98).

This is because—as Ecclesiastes shows us so pointedly—some things simply have no answer in this life. One of the hardest things about Ecclesiastes is learning to accept its thesis that silence is the only available response to certain traumas. Some terror exceeds our capacities to bear. “Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! . . . And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been” (4:1–3). We moderns are so poor at staring long and hard at brokenness that when a believer does, and tells us how he feels, other Christians say he mustn’t be a believer! In reality, however, he simply may be expressing the shattering awfulness of life east of Eden.

Yet by telling us these things—and we should never forget this all the way through the book—the Teacher is teaching us to prepare for judgment and to long for it with every fiber of our beings. We cannot put an end to evil, or explain why natural disasters arrive unannounced, or rationalize the terrorism that blights our globe with cruelty that seems to belong to a bygone age despite our best efforts at peace and reconciliation. But all is not vanity. For judgment is coming.

Judgment is coming.

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
 let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
 let the field exult, and everything in it!
 Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
 before the Lord, for he comes,
 for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness. (Ps. 96:11–13)