

“All is Vapor”

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Ecclesiastes 伝道者の書 1:1-18

For today, I thought I'd start a series on the book of Ecclesiastes. I encourage you to read it for yourself. Early scholars debated whether to include Ecclesiastes in the Bible for various reasons. They finally decided to include it because of the author's emphasis on fearing God and keeping God's commandments. God is actually mentioned 40 times through the book. It's a very unusual and exciting book.

Ecclesiastes contains a number of puzzles which challenge scholars even today. One of the challenges is deciding who wrote Ecclesiastes. At first glance it looks like it is clearly king Solomon. In verse one, we read, “The words of the Evangelist, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Solomon was the son of David, but a few things make it doubtful that Solomon was actually the author. If you study the original Hebrew, much of the language used in Ecclesiastes is not like the language used during Solomon's time. In fact, some of the words are not found in anyone's writing until 400-600 years later, leading most scholars to conclude that it was actually someone else who wrote Ecclesiastes. The author refers to himself as Qohelet which could have the meaning of “one who assembles” or a “collector of wisdom.” It is often translated as “the Teacher,” or “Preacher.” In Japanese, it's “the Evangelist.” The authorship of Ecclesiastes is just one of the puzzles we can find in the book.

When I first read from this part of the Bible, I thought that it seemed to be a pretty depressing book. As I read I kept seeing, “everything is meaningless,” “everything is empty.” In Hebrew, the original word used here is “hevel.” It's repeated 38 times throughout the book, so it's pretty important in the message of the author (or the Evangelist). As I got deeper into studying it, I found out that words like meaningless and empty are likely not the best translation of hevel. Hevel actually means vapor, or breath, although other possible translations do include words like emptiness, or meaninglessness. In The Message Bible translation, the word used is, “smoke.” It's not easy to determine which meaning fits best because the Evangelist uses the word in a number of different ways. In some spots one meaning would seem to fit best, while in other spots, a different translation would seem to fit better. The word empty could match well with a Buddhist way of thinking, and it may fit in some parts of Ecclesiastes, but in other parts, the word fleeting or vapor may fit better.

I like the perspective that understands hevel to have a symbolic meaning with various levels. Using the original meaning of hevel, verse 2 would translate as, “Vapor of vapors, says the Evangelist. Vapor of vapors! All is vapor.” If we think of vapor, it could have various characteristics. It's not solid and concrete, but instead difficult to catch. It can quickly disappear into the air. Life is often like this. We have happy moments, we have sadness. These moments often seem fleeting, like vapor. They come and go. Vapor can be positive like mist coming from a dehumidifier on a dry day, or it can be foul or poisonous like air pollution. Using vapor as a negative image, it can represent the difficulties and problems of life.

I've learned a lot from the Believer's Church Bible Commentary on Ecclesiastes. According to the commentary, the author of Ecclesiastes, “is not declaring all life to be meaningless or absurd; he uses vapor to describe a life full of perplexities, tensions, difficulties; in this context he offers help for living with both the good and the bad aspects of life.” (Commentary p.264) Understanding Ecclesiastes in this way gives me hope. The Evangelist is not necessarily just depressed, with no hope. We are given the author's honest perspective on life's problems, along with some suggestions as to where to find meaning.

In verse 3, the author says, “What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?” The Evangelist's emphasis on “toil” is a key theme throughout the book. Everywhere people work hard, trying to achieve various goals, but in the end what difference does it make? It seems to be just monotonous drudgery. People work hard to make great accomplishments, but years after they've

grown old and died, no one remembers them. Do you remember the names of your great-great-great grandparents? Do you remember what they accomplished? Most things are forgotten in history.

The author reflects on the monotony of repeated things in life. The sun rises and goes down and rises again. The wind blows south and north, around and back again. And, the streams continue to flow to the sea. These three examples from nature parallel verse 8 where three human actions are described – speaking, hearing, and seeing. In verse 8 he says, “All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.”

The Evangelist has been dedicated to seeking wisdom, and although he succeeds in gaining great wisdom, he concludes that all of life “under the sun: just vapor, a chasing after the wind.

The phrase, “under the sun” introduces another key theme throughout Ecclesiastes. It emphasizes the realm of living on the earth, as opposed to the realm of God in heaven, or the realm of the dead (called “Sheol” in ancient times). The Evangelist is saying that everything he sees, all the hard work of people, all the worldly things around him will someday be gone. Everything “under the sun” is temporary. Nothing lasts, and people are forgotten.

In chapter one, the Evangelist has painted a bleak picture, trying to be honest in his description of the monotony he sees in life, or living “under the sun.” So, how do we see ourselves in this first chapter? Have you experienced problems reaching your goals? Have you ever sensed that you’ve been chasing after the wind, trying to achieve something that keeps disappearing, just like a vapor slipping through your fingers? Or maybe your life feels like you’re trying to run up an escalator going down. (As a kid, I found out that you can get kicked out of a shopping mall for doing that kind of thing)! We all have times when we feel like we’re chasing after the wind. Things are just not working. Maybe we’re feeling anxious, angry, or exhausted, because we’re chasing after the wind. Do you agree with the Evangelist’s evaluation of how we live and work in our lives? He definitely doesn’t “sugar-coat” his message. Even human wisdom has its limits.

In the following chapters, we will see how the Evangelist finds meaning in a focus on our relationship with God. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus encourages us to “Seek first the kingdom of God...” We can become depressed if we focus only on things of this world, things “under the sun.” When we draw our attention to the realm of God, and God’s Son, Jesus Christ, we find hope. Let’s pray.

Loving God, thank-you for your word in the Bible. There are so many different types of writing that it’s often hard to understand some passages. In the book of Ecclesiastes, we see the reflections of someone of great wisdom, who seems to be weary of life. As we continue to read these reflections, may your Spirit speak to us that we may learn your message. We confess times when we’ve forgotten about you, times when we’ve been caught up in our daily work. Help us to admit our own limitations, and put greater trust in you we pray. Teach us to look beyond ourselves to the way you are leading, through Christ our Lord, Amen.