

Introduction to Ecclesiastes

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We don't read and study the Word of God merely to accumulate head knowledge, but to then apply its teachings to our lives. We are to be *sanctified by truth* (John 17:17) and *transformed by the renewing of our minds* (Rom 12:2).

One of the ways we can describe the impact the Word has on our lives is through what we call a "biblical worldview." A biblical worldview seeks to use the Word of God as a sort of lens through which we view life and make sense of all that goes on around us from a biblical, heavenly perspective. That way, when tragedies strike, or circumstances arise that the world doesn't understand, we as believers still do. We ought to be different!

We can derive this biblical worldview from the entirety of Scripture; but there is perhaps no better single book to help us make sense of this life more than Ecclesiastes. Naturally, it is a difficult book at face value, with seemingly contradictory or nonsensical statements, but once we grasp a few important keys, glorious truths are unlocked.

I. Introduction (1:1)

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Ecclesiastes opens with a cut and dry statement as to its authorship. Naturally, there are those that seek to deny that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, but there is no good reason to deny it, and very many to accept it! After all, the Word of God tells us he was the wisest man to have ever lived (1 Kings 3:1-15). Who better to give us this treatment on the purpose of life?

One of the key words in Ecclesiastes is the Hebrew word *hevel*. *Hevel* occurs 86 times in the entire Old Testament, 38 of which

appear in Ecclesiastes. This is what we consider a significant statistic! Whenever we see a word used like this, the sirens should be blaring in our heads alerting us to something significant!

Hevel is translated a number of ways across the major versions: *vanity* (NKJV/KJV, ESV, NASB95), *futility* (HCSB/CSB, NASB20), and *meaningless* (NIV). Yet, when we turn to the Hebrew lexicons, we see a primary definition of *breath* or *vapor*. How then does *hevel* come to be translated so figuratively in Ecclesiastes?

Old Testament scholar (and Liberty University professor) Richard Alan Fuhr has made a great case for how a word for *breath* could be translated as *futility*, and it helps unlock the meaning of Ecclesiastes. While he is by no means alone in this understanding, he has probably written the most extensive study on the matter. Think about our breath for a moment:

1. **Our breath doesn't last long.** This is clearly illustrated when we exhale on a cold, crisp day. We can see our breath for only a moment before it dissipates in the surrounding air. There is nothing long-lasting to breath.
2. **Our breath can't affect much.** Unlike the wolf blowing down the houses of straw and sticks, we're pretty much limited to blowing out small fires. There is nothing weighty or substantial to breath.
3. **Our breath stinks.** Go a day or two without good oral hygiene, and what happens? It's putrid and undesirable! There is nothing enjoyable about natural breath.

Now, when we come across these 38 appearances of *vanity*, *futility*, or *meaningless*, keep these three aspects in mind. After all, life has meaning, it has a purpose. God created for a reason; nevertheless, the life we have is brief, is ineffectual on any large scale, and, yes, it can stink! (Interestingly, the Message probably translates it the best with *smoke*!)

Welcome to Ecclesiastes, a brief handbook on an eternal perspective in a vaporous world!