

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes 1:1-12:14

By Phil Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2019-08-18

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I. The confusion over this book is completely resolved when one understands that it is a book on apologetics

Many of you have listened to Dr. Bahnsen's debates - the debates with the atheists Dr. Gordon Stein and Mr. Tabash; and at least some of you have listened to Doug Wilson's debates with the atheists Dan Barker and Christopher Hitchens. And if you haven't, you really need to. I think those four debates constitute some of the best examples of apologetics out there. And each of those debates captures aspects of the brilliant apologetics that is happening in the book of Ecclesiastes.

You may not have thought of Ecclesiastes as a book on apologetics, but it is. I think Eaton demonstrates that it is. Like Bahnsen, Solomon argues that if you leave God out of your thinking, your words, your actions, your plans, and your dominion, your life will inevitably be reduced to foolishness and/or pointlessness. Every book of the Bible has a strategic purpose for its placement in the canon, and the purpose of Ecclesiastes is to be a textbook case on proper Biblical presuppositional apologetics in how to answer a fool. Proverbs has already given the first part of that paradigm by clearly presenting a Biblical worldview that explains all of life. When that is rejected, Ecclesiastes then shows the foolishness of the fool. So there is a purpose even in the order of these books. And at the end of this book he sends you back to the book of Proverbs.

And this book does not just answer the foolish atheist. It also is an apologetic against the Christian who leaves God out of most compartments of his life. That is going to leave you empty too. It is an apologetic against secularism. It is a powerful argument against anything that aims less high than Christ calls us to aim for in the Sermon on the Mount - seeking God's kingdom and His righteousness rather than seeking after all the things in which secularists try to find satisfaction.

If you don't take that approach to the book of Ecclesiastes, you will be constantly puzzled by how this book alternates back and forth between apparently contradictory statements. It is simply alternating between answering a fool according to his folly and not answering a fool according to

his folly. They are not contradictory at all, but without the keys to interpreting the book you could easily take them as being contradictory.

Robert Johnston catalogs the bewildering variety of opinions that result when commentaries try to integrate every word of this book into one worldview rather than seeing it as presenting two worldviews. He asks, Was the author

... a pessimist, a skeptic, a practical atheist, a relativist, a preacher of joy, a dialectical thinker... an existentialist, a realist, someone who was simply resigned? All these interpretations have been seriously entertained... The interpretive quagmire of the Book of Ecclesiastes has existed right up to the present.¹

But if you take it as a book on apologetics that illustrates the two-fold approach to apologetics that we looked at in Proverbs, everything falls into place. Proverbs 26:4-5 says,

Prov. 26:4 Do not answer a fool according to his folly, Lest you also be like him. 5 Answer a fool according to his folly, Lest he be wise in his own eyes.

It is important to realize that there are places in this book where Solomon is answering a fool according to his folly and showing the utter foolishness of leaving God out of any parts of our life. And those are often immediately contrasted with paragraphs that are not answering a fool according to his folly, but are instead applying the law of God (just like Proverbs did). All of the words of this book come from God; all are inspired; all are inerrant, but they are describing two different worldviews. And either way exposes the fool's folly. Solomon negatively exposes the folly of secularism by showing that it will never satisfy him or give him ultimate meaning. He positively exposes the folly of secularism by pointing to the joy and full satisfaction that comes from living life under God's throne. Those two worldviews are juxtaposed in incredibly vivid language. So I am telling you where I am going before I go there. But let's work to getting there. Let's first of all look at four presuppositions.

II. Four principles needed to understand this book (vv. 1-2)

A. Solomon wrote this book near the end of his life (1:1,12, and verses throughout the book)

The first presupposition is that Solomon wrote this book. Verse 1 says, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." It has been

¹ Robert K. Johnston, "Beyond Futility: American Beauty and the Book of Ecclesiastes," in Emily Giresinger, Mark A. Eaton (eds.), *The Gift of Story: Narrating Hope in a Postmodern World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), p. 87.

popular in recent years to deny that this son of David was Solomon despite dozens of clues throughout the book that clearly identify him. But Walter Kaiser vigorously shows how a denial of Solomonic authorship leads to inevitable compromises - such as having to claim that it is written by an anonymous author trying to pretend to be Solomon. That's not godly; that's deceitful.

And I won't get into all of the argumentation; I just want you to know my presupposition. Having read all the reasons proposed as to why the traditional view is wrong, I agree with Walter Kaiser that this book was written by Solomon towards the end of his 60-70 year life (depending upon the chronologist).² When you hold to that view, many conundrums are resolved.

B. Every word of the “words” in this book are inspired and inerrant (v. 1 with 12:9-13)

The second presupposition relates to the word “words” in verse 1. I believe that every word in this book is inspired and inerrant. We aren't dealing with false quotes of a secularist pitted against true words of Solomon. That's the way some people take it. But verse 1 indicates that every word comes from Solomon the prophet, and the conclusion in chapter 12:9-10 shows that every word is inspired. 12:9 says that the knowledge he taught here is the same as what he taught in Proverbs, not contradictory to it. He is referring people back to the book of Proverbs to get the fuller Biblical worldview. Well, Proverbs says that there can be no true knowledge apart from the revelation of Scripture. Then in Ecclesiastes 12:10 he calls the words “upright” words, using the Hebrew word *yashar* - they are *yashar* words (*יָשָׁר*), which the dictionary defines as an “attributive adjective [that] is used to emphasize an attribute of: a. God” (TWOT). They come from God; they are words of God. Third, the same verse calls those words “words of truth,” an expression that points to the inerrancy of Scripture elsewhere. Fourth, the words are said to be given by one Shepherd, referring to the Son of God. And fifth, he connects these words with God's commandments in verses 13-14.

So if every word is inspired and inerrant, then we cannot hold to an interpretation that will do violence to or that will downplay any portion of

² He says, “Therefore, given the Solomonic authorship of the book, it will be best placed not before his apostasy, for the questions and sins of Ecclesiastes did not trouble him then, nor during his years of rebellion, for then he had no occasion to use the language of spiritual things. Ecclesiastes is best placed after his apostasy, when both his recent turmoil and repentance were still fresh in his mind.” Kaiser, Ecclesiastes, pp. 30-31. See also 1 Kings 11. See also Jerusalem Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin 20c.

the book, as so many commentaries tend to do. Both sides of apparently contradictory statements are critically important to understand in this masterful book on apologetics.

C. *The meaning of Qoholeth = Apologist, Philosopher, Teacher, Preacher (1:1-2,12; 7:27; 12:8-10)*

Next, chapter 1:1 calls this son of David the Qoholeth. It is variously translated as Preacher, Teacher, Philosopher, and Apologist. The word literally means one who gathers. If he was gathering students, then he might be a teacher. And that's the way some translations translate it. If you are gathering the congregation, you might be the preacher. If you are gathering wisdom, you might be a Philosopher. And if you are gathering those who are straying from God or who are unbelievers, you might be an Apologist. And all four of those words are legitimate translations. I'm not sure you have to pick between them. But Solomon was definitely acting in the role of an apologist.

D. *The meaning of "vanity" (used 38x) is much worse than you think and Solomon presses home the meaning of that term (hebel - הֶבֶל) to convince fools to turn from their folly*

The last presupposition is that the meaning of the word "vanity" cannot be turned into a positive. Too many commentaries try to incorporate that word into the Christian worldview. But that word is far worse than you might think. When you understand the meaning of that word, verse 2 is shocking. "Vanity of vanities," says the Apologist; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." How could everything be vanity? The Hebrew word refers to false hopes, vain hopes, emptiness, meaninglessness, worthlessness, and being without any purpose whatsoever. It is used quite a number of times in the Bible as a synonym for pagan gods and idols because of how worthless and empty they are.³ Some commentators have pointed out that no one English word captures the nuances of the Hebrew, so Fox suggests that we incorporate the Hebrew word hebel into our English like we did the Greek word agape.⁴ It

3 Jenni and Westermann state, "As a designation for other gods in the Dtr accusation against Israel's apostasy (Deut 32:21; 1 Kgs 16:13, 26; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; 8:19) and as a contrasting motif in the confession of confidence: the worshiper relies upon Yahweh, not upon the idols (Psa 31:7; Jer 14:22; 16:19; Jonah 2:9; see also the late idol polemic in Jer 10:3, 8, 15)." Albertz, R. Jenni, Ernst and Claus Westermann, eds. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Accordance electronic ed., version 3.3. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997. <https://accordance.bible/link/read/Jenni-Westermann#4691>

4 "The word used here, hebel, means "vapor" or "breath" and is used in Isa 57:13 parallel with "wind" and in Prov 21:6 for "a fleeting vapor." The word can thus combine the notions of being insubstantial and transitory, as in Ps 144:4, "Man is like a breath." In this sense the English word that best approximates the meaning of this word is "vapid." The Hebrew word is also used in Zech 10:2 ("in

occurs 38 times in Ecclesiastes, and some contexts require it to mean absurdity. Other contexts require it to mean emptiness. Others show that it contains the idea of uselessness.

Let me give you some Bible translations of this word “vanity.” The Expanded Bible tries to stuff as many of the nuances into their translation as they can, rendering it,

The Teacher [or Preacher; Assembler; 1:1] says, “Useless [Meaningless; or Absurd; or Enigmatic; or Transient; Vanity; Vapor; Bubble; ...]! Useless! Completely useless! Everything is useless.”

Of course, translations don’t flow very well when you expand on words like that, so most versions have to opt for one nuance or another. I’m going to give you twelve quite different translations from the most common Bible Versions that go beyond “All is vanity.”

- The NIV has the last phrase, “Everything is meaningless.” That should be shocking to you, because you and I find meaning in all kinds of things. Christ gives meaning to all of life. And actually, Ecclesiastes itself later says that God gives meaning to everything. Ecclesiastes says that!
- Several versions render it, “Absolutely pointless! Everything is pointless.”

vain”), which says that idols give vapid comfort; that is, the comfort is empty, fleeting, and therefore a lie. On the other hand, “vapid” does not begin to capture the full range of meaning for *hebel*. The word can refer to that which is deceitful or ineffectual, especially as used of false gods (Jer 16:19). In addition, as M. Fox points out, *hebel* is often used in Ecclesiastes in ways for which translations like “fleeting” or “meaningless” are not appropriate. In 8:14, for example, the Teacher pronounces as *hebel* the injustice of the righteous receiving the recompense due to the wicked (and the converse). He does not here mean “ephemeral” (which in this case would be a good thing) or “meaningless” (i.e., of no real significance) but “absurd.” In other words, injustice is contrary to how the world should operate; it is an active violation of what ought to be the moral order. The dictates of wisdom and reason are no longer sure guides because the world itself is warped and capricious. Thus, for example, the man who works hard but sees all his profit go to one who has not shared in his labor is a victim of *hebel* (2:18–21). It is also an absurdity—an offense to reason—that the wise and the fool share the same fate (2:14–15). People ought to get what they deserve. In fact, *hebel* has become a catchword for the negation of values. Even this does not exhaust the meaning of *hebel*. When the Teacher says that pleasure is a *hebel* and accomplishes nothing (2:1–2), he does not mean that pleasures are strictly absurd or even primarily that they are fleeting. Rather, he means that they are a waste of time in that they fail to satisfy. In this sense *hebel* might correctly be translated “meaningless” (“foolish”). Verbosity too is *hebel*: “The more the words, the less the meaning” (6:11; cf. 5:7). The multiplying of words is not strictly absurd, nor is it to be understood as ephemeral. It is simply an activity without real significance. How then is *hebel* to be translated? The NIV consistently translates it as “meaningless,” but in many passages this falls short of the mark. Fox attempts to justify “absurd” as the best single-word translation of the term, but his exposition is overly influenced by the existentialist philosophy of Camus; in some cases “absurd” is plainly inadequate. Other single-word equivalents such as “vapid” or the older “vanity” are equally inadequate. It is doubtful, in fact, whether an ancient Israelite would have grasped the full range of meaning inherent in the Teacher’s use of *hebel* prior to the writing of Ecclesiastes itself. One option, of course, is to translate *hebel* with a number of different words in accordance with context. This is legitimate translation procedure; but, as Fox points out, the Teacher is building a case around the word *hebel*. A variety of translations obscure this. It may be that the modern, Christian reader can do no better than to import *hebel* into his or her vocabulary, much as has been done with *αγαπε* and to a lesser extent *koinonia*.” Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, vol. 14, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 282–283.

(Common English Bible and several other versions) And without taking the time to name the Bibles that I am quoting, let me quickly just read the translations:

- “All is to no purpose” (Bible in Basic English).
- “Everything is futile” (Holman Christian Standard Bible)
- “”Nothing matters!” (The Complete Jewish Bible)
- “Nothing makes sense!” (CEV)
- “All is useless” (GNT and several other versions)
- “There is nothing to anything. It is all smoke.” (The Message)
- “Nothing has meaning” (NIRV)
- “All is for nothing” (New Life Version)
- “Completely meaningless” (New Living Translation)
- “Everything is empty and futile” (Wycliffe Bible translators)

It is my view that Solomon is not calling us to see everything as meaningless - as some people think. Instead, he is making an observation that everything is already and automatically meaningless unless... something is present. You don't need to work at life being meaningless. It will automatically be meaningless unless something is in place. And there are several keys in this book that give us that “something” that must be in place. But right from the get-go, verse 2 immediately sets up some rather striking contrasts in this book no matter which way you translate this word, hebel. I don't care which translation you pick:

- If you translate it as “All is to no purpose” then it appears to contradict chapter 3 where everything has a purpose. We need to see these contrasts in the book.
- If you translate it as “all is hopeless” it appears to contradict chapter 9:4, which says that “there is hope...” Which is it? - “all is hopeless” or “there is hope”? Well, it depends upon how you are living your life. Ecclesiastes is not presenting one view of life. It is presenting two views of life and warning us strongly to avoid the view that leads to hebel. According to verse 1, Solomon is looking backward in time and speaking about himself objectively as if he is another person. He has now repented of his backslidden days and is no longer the person that he was for a few years. He is no longer in the despairing situation he used to find himself in because he had come back to the Lord after a period of backsliding. And that is why so many of these chapters use the past tense. So even if you translate it as “all is hopeless” he later makes clear that he no longer thinks that way - “there is hope.”
- If you translate it as “all is meaningless” it appears to be contradicted by most of chapter 3, which not only speaks of purpose, and a time for everything, but also says, “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.” All of history is providentially headed to a meaningful conclusion. Likewise, it appears to contradict 5:20 - “God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart.” Or 7:18 - “he who fears God will escape from them all.” Those are quite different statements. Verse 2 is absolutely true of one group of people and the other statements are absolutely true for another group of people. Which group do you want to be in? Solomon is trying to motivate us to abandon the things that make all of life vanity. I utterly reject the view that says

- this book is putting Christians at ease with cynicism and enabling them to be OK with saying, “All is vanity.” The New Testament is quite clear that the Christian should never make that statement of himself, but should instead make that statement of all unbelief. That statement is only a true description of the backslidden Solomon and anyone else who lives his life apart from God. And I’ll give you crystal clear proof from the New Testament.
- If the Hebrew word is translated as “all is pointless” it appears to be contradicted by 3:11 where God “has made everything beautiful in its time.” It’s not pointless; it is beautiful. And 8:12 says, “it will be well with those who fear God.” It’s not pointless, but it will be well. Indeed, Solomon gets to the point of life when he ends the book saying, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: ‘Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all...’” So there is a point to life. It is not pointless to the person who fears the Lord. It is the opposite.
 - If it is translated as “all is vanity” or “all is worthless” (which amounts to the same thing), then it is contrasted by numerous verses that show a “God-given task” (3:10), or the “gift of God” (3:13), and other phrases.
 - If you focus on transitoriness by translating it, “All is breath” or “All is transitory” or “nothing lasts,” you appear to be contradicting 3:1, which states that God “has put eternity in their hearts.” Or 3:14, “I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing can be taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him.”
 - If you focus on the misery implied in the word, then it is contradicted by 2:6 which says that “God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight.” That is saying that if you are good in God’s sight, you can have joy in every circumstance. Or 5:20, “because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart.” Or 9:7, “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already accepted your works.” That’s what gives meaning and joy - when you know that your labors in the Lord are not in vain; that God accepts all that you do.

And the New Testament highlights exactly what I am saying about this phrase. The New Testament uses the very unique (and very rare) Greek word that the Septuagint used to translated this word Hebel - so rare that you can think of these New Testament verses as clear references to Ecclesiastes. And this word is always used as a negative thing. In Ephesians 4:17 Paul says, “no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility (ματαιότης) of their mind.” It is possible for Christians to put off this approach of vanity in their thinking. But Paul was saying that some of the Christians in Ephesus were experiencing at least some of this vanity of vanities. They were thinking like the heathen. Like Solomon, they shouldn’t have been, but they were. And he commands them to stop thinking that way. Romans 1:21 describes unbelievers, that “although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile (there is the same word, ματαιόω) in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

The apostle Paul reflected the meaning of Ecclesiastes 1:2 (with exactly the

same word from the Greek translation of Ecclesiastes) when he said, “If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile (μάρταιος).” If Christ is not risen. Two verses later he says, “If in this life only we have hope... we are of all men the most pitiable.” In verse 14 Paul said, “And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.” And in verse 17 Paul said, “And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” Without Christ and His power, everything is vanity of vanities. That is exactly what Paul is saying, and that is exactly what the book of Ecclesiastes is teaching. I know this may seem like overkill, but false approaches to this book are so common that I want to make it crystal clear.

III. Three interpretive clues (“under the sun” 29x versus “under heaven” 3x and/or “God” 42x)

So back to Ecclesiastes - in verses 2 and following, Ecclesiastes sets before us the doctrine that all of life is empty, useless, pointless, and meaningless unless something is different. What is that something? It is indicated by a contrast between the phrase “under the sun” and the word “God” and/or the phrase “under heaven.” “Under the sun” and “under heaven” are not synonyms. Look at chapter 1:3 - “What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?” That phrase, “under the sun,” occurs 29 times in Ecclesiastes. Do we have profit from what we labor in the Lord? Yes, because 1 Corinthians 15 ends by saying that our labors in the Lord are not vain. But you have no profit if you are just doing it under the sun - in other words, if you have rejected the worldview of Proverbs. Paul said that your whole life will be burned up as hay, wood, and stubble - even if you are a Christian.

If God is not in your thoughts, then the highest thing in your sky is the physical sun, not God. Psalm 10:4 describes the wicked this way: “The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts.” If God is in none of your thoughts hour after hour during the day, then the highest thing in your vision is the physical sun, or if you are indoors, it is your ceiling. Jesus was the opposite - All His thoughts and words and actions constantly reflected the Father. He had a constant awareness of the Father’s presence and power. God was in all of His thoughts and He related all of His thoughts and works to the kingdom of heaven. Christians line up somewhere in between. None of us are as bad as an atheist and none of us are as good as Jesus on this issue.

IV. The Christ of Ecclesiastes

A. Solomon points to the book of Proverbs for the true wisdom of Christ (12:9-11)

And this book does present Christ as the answer just as the New Testament does. It does so in two ways. First, in chapter 12:9-11 Solomon points people back to his earlier book of Proverbs to discover the true wisdom of Christ that gives meaning to life. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes belong together in our apologetic method. Proverbs is not answering a fool according to his folly. Parts of Ecclesiastes is answering a fool according to his folly.

As we saw in Proverbs 30, Agur the prophet said that he was stupid and utterly without knowledge and wisdom apart from divine revelation in the Bible. And he said that this divine revelation was provided by the Son of God. In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and when we seek wisdom and knowledge or anything else apart from Him, it is hebel, or vanity. Thus Proverbs 13:11 speaks of wealth gained apart from Christ as vanity, or hebel (see also 21:6). Proverbs 31:30 says that even charm is deceitful and beauty is hebel or vanity, but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. So Proverbs calls us to reject the wisdom of the world and submit to the wisdom of Christ.

This was the answer to the problem that started in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were tempted by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and tempted by Satan's promise to give them wisdom and meaning apart from God's revelation. And their momentary rebellion of independence from God's word plunged this world into the vanity of vanities that it currently exists in. They were barred from the tree of life.

Well, Proverbs offers us the tree of life. Those who embrace Lady Wisdom are embracing a tree of life. It reverses the Garden of Eden temptation. Proverbs 3:18 says, "She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her." And later proverbs indicate that we become trees of life as we put Scriptural wisdom on our tongues. It is a kind of reversal of what happened in Genesis 3. But it all flows from Christ and His wisdom and a rejection of the wisdom of the world, which is symbolized by Lady Folly.

About 20 years into his reign, 1 Kings 11 says that Solomon gave in to sexual desires and abandoned the monogamy that Proverbs and Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes all command us to have and disaster resulted. By the way, we will see next week that he was a monogamist for up to 30 of his 60-70 years. The first 13 years or so he was married exclusively to Naamah,

and after she died, he was married exclusively to the converted daughter of Pharaoh - who later apostatized. But there is evidence that even she was initially a convert. The early Solomon was a faithful man. But in any case, it was only in 1 Kings chapter 11 that he started getting wives “in addition to” his second wife, whom he had been living monogamously with for up to 17 years.

But once his backsliding happened, it happened with a vengeance. His pagan wives that he multiplied to himself turned his heart away to idols and his wisdom was turned into foolishness. He was still smart and had the brain power to have the wisdom of the world, but it left him empty. He tried pursuing many other things and they too left him empty. It was not until he returned back to the Lord that he rediscovered the fulfillment and joy in the Lord that he once had.

B. Solomon points people to submit to the true Shepherd, Jesus Christ (12:11)

So chapter 12:9-11 refers readers back to the wisdom of Christ in the Proverbs. But then chapter 12:11 points people to submit to the one true Shepherd, Jesus Christ. It says, “The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd.” The word Shepherd is rightly capitalized, since it points to the Good Shepherd, Jesus. That Good Shepherd guarantees that he will seek out a wandering sheep and bring him back into the fold. And that is precisely what God did with Solomon. God disciplined Solomon, and he later repented of his polygamy, idolatry, and dull-heartedness, and he returned to the Lord with all of his heart. He then wrote by inspiration this book designed to convince people not to imitate him.

V. Overview of the book in light of Biblical theology

So let’s do a quick overview of the book to see how this apologetic works. And let me highlight first of all the things that Solomon tried in order to find satisfaction during his backslidden years. Initially no one knew he was backslidden. It started in the heart.

He worked hard, yet in 1:3 it says, “What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?” Despite the fact that 1 Corinthians 15 says that our labors in the Lord are not in vain, he was beginning to see it as all in vain.

In verse 8 he seeks to satisfy his curiosity with new things. Some people are

always buying things or looking for something new to fill the spiritual void inside. But Solomon comes to discover in verse 9, “That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.” Constantly seeking something new did not satisfy. Yes, it was new to him, but what’s the point?

In verse 13 he tries to research everything done under heaven (note that phrase, “under heaven”), so he was initially researching with God in mind. He recognized in verse 16 that God had made him wiser than the ancients, but in verse 18 concluded, “For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.” So the drifting started even while he acknowledged God and was not yet serving idols. Even slight drifting from the Lord, such as occurred in 1 Kings 10, leads to hebel. It’s not just the major compromises of 1 Kings 11 that leads to hebel. Even the slight drifting of the previous chapter does.

In Ecclesiastes 2:1 he tried laughter and comedy and similar entertainment, but that too left him empty.

When he tried every kind of fine wine out there in verse 3, he was still doing it with a consciousness of God, but without a heart for God. So his sliding was initially more subtle. You can backslide even while you are praying and worshiping. You can be backslidden while sitting in church right now. And that is certainly where Solomon was at in 1 Kings 10.

In verses 4-8 he had access to everything that the world thinks might satisfy. He had the finest houses and other buildings, the best gardens, lakes, servants to tend to his possessions, massive amounts of wealth, and entertainment, and more and more it left him empty. So far we are still in the very subtle forms of backsliding that Solomon had in 1 Kings 10. Chapter 10 (where he meets the Queen of Sheba) was when it all began unraveling. Some believe that his first compromise was actually sleeping with the Queen of Sheba (giving her her heart’s desire), and when he did not repent, he began sliding. The Ethiopians certainly claim that their kings descended by an illicit relationship between Solomon and their Queen. The text only hints at it, so we can’t know for sure, but the statements before verse 10 were before chapter 11.

So from here on in Ecclesiastes is documenting 1 Kings chapter 11 kinds of experiences and compromises. Verse 10 says, “Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure...” That’s a pretty frank admission to sin. It was this experimentation with every pleasure (including unlawful sexual pleasures that 1 Kings 11 speaks of) that

led him further and further from God. And he says that initially he had a lot of fun. That's why people compromise, right? It's fun - at least initially. But over time his conclusion in verse 11 became, "Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun."

In the next verses he comforted himself with the pursuit of more wisdom, but then concluded in verse 16,

For there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever. Since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise man die? As the fool!

The more Solomon moves from God, the more miserable God ensures that he becomes. Look at how low Solomon sank in chapter 2, verses 17-18.

17 Therefore I hated life because the work that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is vanity and grasping for the wind. 18 Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me.

Verse by verse God was taking away his enjoyment of life. He had worked so hard to build up the glories of his possessions and of his kingdom, but became depressed in verse 18-19 when he realized that his son Rehoboam (who apparently was his only male heir according to a CMI article) had been following in his steps and was utterly unworthy to inherit it.

In verse 20 he says, "Therefore I turned my heart and despaired of all the labor in which I had toiled under the sun." These are frank admissions that are not the norm for the Christian, but always accompany those who live life only under the sun.

But now in verses 24-26 Solomon gives one of his many contrasts between those who serve God and those who do not. And I want you to note the repetition of the word "God." I have circled every time that the word "God" appears in the book and underlined the expressions "under the sun" and "under heaven" to more vividly show this downward slide that parallels the progression in 1 Kings 10 and following. Anyway, look at verses 24-26.

Eccl. 2:24 Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. 25 For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? 26 For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; [but here comes a contrast] but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

Who is it vanity and grasping of the wind for? Not for the man who is good before God but for the sinner. In contrast to the hebel or vanity for the sinner, look at chapter 3's description for the one who walks before God and seeks the kingdom of heaven.

Eccl. 3:1 To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: 2 A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted; 3 A time to kill, And a time to heal; A time to break down, And a time to build up; 4 A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance; 5 A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing; 6 A time to gain, And a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away; 7 A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak; 8 A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace.

Then come several other contrasts between the two worldviews. Let me just read verses 11 and following. In 3:11-13 he says,

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor - it is the gift of God.

Enjoying life is a gift of God. That's why Solomon couldn't enjoy life during his backslidden years. God's not going to bless backsliding. Enjoying life is a gift of God. If you are miserable, repent of your backsliding. You can't fully enter into the enjoyment of a flower, a sunset or poetry without God's gracious help. But everything, including sweeping the floor can be a joy when you do it as a love service for God with a consciousness of His approving presence.

Back in chapter 2:24-25 Solomon had said,

There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, was from the hand of God.

That's the only place it can come from. When you truly receive food and drink from the loving hands of a personal God, there is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and that his soul should enjoy the good in his labor. It's wonderful. It's not hebel. This is said by a man who knew what vexation of spirit; and I think in part it was because his first compromise had opened him up to demonic influence. And each new wife opened him to more demonic influences until he was almost blind. But this was also a man who knew what living under heaven with joy is all about. If you are living life under heaven, it doesn't matter what your circumstance, whether rich or poor, you can enjoy life and you need nothing better.

Chapter 4 shows the discouragement he saw over changing corruption in politics. It seemed hopeless. Of course his compromises gave Satan a stronghold in his kingdom. Apparently there is nothing new under the sun. But he observes the puzzle that in the midst of that mess there are poor people who can enjoy their friendships while politically strong people are miserable. He recognized that.

And I'll skip over several chapters that contain similar back and forth contrasts and just give you two more from later chapters. Chapter 9:9 says, "Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your fleeting life." God is not against pleasure. He wrote an entire book of the Bible (the Song of Solomon) to help couples find maximum pleasure from their married life. He wants us to enjoy life in all of its facets, all of our days. And by the way, that verse is a strong call to monogamy. "Live joyfully with the wife [singular] whom you love all the days of your fleeting life." Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon are all strong calls to monogamy.

Chapter 11:7 says, "Truly the light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun." Even the simple things like the sunshine brought him delight when he walked in fellowship with God. But he hated everything when he was not in fellowship with God.

VI. Enjoyment of life doesn't just happen (11:9-12:8)

But let's get to the practical of how to enter more and more into that state of fulfillment and joy all of our days. And I am getting this from chapter 11:9 through to the end of chapter 12.

A. *It is commanded ("Rejoice")*

The first thing he indicates is that enjoyment doesn't just happen. Vanity does. Vanity can happen all by itself, but not enjoyment. If we are to learn to enjoy life, then we need to take the responsibility squarely on our shoulders. This section starts with a command. "Rejoice." It doesn't say, "Beg God to make life less miserable." It doesn't say, "Hope that a friend will come along." It doesn't say, "Get married so that you can start to enjoy life." It doesn't say, "Pray for healing so that you can begin to enjoy life." Ecclesiastes assumes that we will have pain, and troubles and aging, but it still gives us the responsibility to rejoice all our days - without exception.

And of course this is consistent with the rest of the Bible. Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice." Now you might be thinking of a condition in your life in which you can't rejoice, but you'll have to take that up with Paul. He said, "Rejoice in the Lord always." By my computer count we are commanded to rejoice well over 100 times in the Bible. God does not want our Christianity to be dull or our faces dour. He commands us to rejoice. And if you have the right worldview, you can rejoice.

B. There is no need to wait for it (“in your youth”)

Secondly, Solomon says there is no need to wait until you are older before you can begin to enjoy life. Unlike the 20th century when youth is admired and we hate getting old, people back then looked forward to getting old. They might have thought that really living was when you could leave home. And once you left home, they might have thought that really living was when you owned your own farm. And when you owned your own farm you might think, “Wow! I wish I was one of the elders in the gates. Then I could really enjoy life.” Solomon says, don’t ever wait to enjoy life or it will never happen. The last phrase of verse 10 says, for childhood and youth are vanity and in 12:1-8 he says that old age has its vanity. Waiting won’t solve anything. Waiting won’t get rid of the vanity. You can be bored and empty as a youth and you can be bored and empty as an old man. So in 11:9 he says, “Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.”

The key to enjoying life when you are old is learning to enjoy life now. The key to enjoying life with a donut in your hand is the same key to enjoying life when the fridge is empty and the donut store is closed. The key is being focused on, enamored with, and centered on God. One of the greatest problems Christians face is that they are waiting to enjoy life. Some are longing for the day when they will be able to pay off their debts, get a home or buy an automobile. But the truth is that as long as you seek happiness in this way, it will elude you. Even if you have everything that you’ve always wanted you will not have what you really need. Christ warned us, “Take heed, and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.” (Luke 12:15). I am convinced that if you feel that you need even one dollar more in order to be happy, you never will be happy. Because not even when you have an abundance does your life consist in your possessions. Some might think, “I will truly be happy if I could only have a child.” But Mark 10 tells us that the irony of life is that we can only enjoy our wife, our children our lands and our houses when we give those up to God and are satisfied with God and treat those things merely as a stewardship trust.

C. Your attitudes and planning make a difference (vv. 9c-d)

Verse 9 goes on to say that having the right attitude and planning is key. Walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes [or as the margin says “as you see to be best”]. In other words, your attitudes and planning make all the difference in the world. We can’t just let life happen to

us. We need to evaluate what is the best use of our time and energies, evaluate what resources we have, and make decisions to live consistently with that.

Too many people come home without having planned to watch TV, but after they plop in the chair, that's the easiest thing to have access to. And so they sit and channel surf letting whatever hits them hits them. That's a passive approach to enjoyment that does not maximize life. The same people walk into the kitchen without thinking or planning what they will eat. They just graze as the notion hits them. This verse indicates that our heart should guide our eyes to a life of enjoyment, and as the margin indicates, we need to evaluate what is best. Your attitudes and planning make a huge difference.

D. God will hold you accountable for this (v. 9e)

But Solomon doesn't want to be misunderstood as saying that any impulses of the heart, or any way you see as being right will bring enjoyment. He says, "But know that for all these God will bring you into judgment." It is when our heart and our plans conform to God's law, that true enjoyment comes. As Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart." When your heart and your plans are as they should be, then far from being frustrated, you will constantly be given the desires of your heart.

VII. How to enjoy life

A. "Vexation" is determined by heart attitude, not by circumstances (v. 10a)

But what are the steps for enjoying life? We will go through them quickly. He says in verse 10: "Therefore remove vexation from your heart." The idea of the Hebrew word for vexation is heart resistance to something that can't be resisted. This is a major hindrance to enjoying life - getting frustrated, anxious, resentful or angry over things we cannot change. It is the result of trying to take God's providence on your shoulders. As long as you try doing what is God's work alone - like changing your spouses heart for example, you will end up being frustrated and unable to enjoy your spouse as fully. Some people get frustrated because they can't change the humanism in the American government. Others get frustrated because they can't change the way their boss thinks. Others get bitter from mistreatment. But while people can abuse you or refuse to change, only you can let them make you frustrated, angry and bitter. Refuse to allow your heart to be controlled by

the evil out there. Remove vexation from your heart. It won't do any good. Be faithful with what is your responsibility, and relax in what is God's responsibility.

B. Pursue holiness (v. 10b)

A second step is to pursue holiness. 11:10 goes on to say, "and put away evil from your flesh." Ironically, even Christians often think the opposite. They see God's laws as designed to make us miserable and occasionally are tempted to throw off the restraints of the law. That is like a train wanting to be free by leaving the tracks. A train was built for tracks just as we were built for the law, and the only way that train can have speed, power, freedom and functionality is as it restricts itself to its maker's design. Solomon knew the misery of throwing off the Maker's design for monogamy. God's law is always best. James twice calls the law of God the "perfect law of liberty" (1:25;2:12). There can be no liberty when we leave the railroad tracks of the law. Christ says that obedience to His commandments brings fullness of joy.

C. Don't equate happiness with physical vitality (v. 10c)

The next step is seen in the third part of verse 10 - to remember that happiness is not dependent on physical vitality. And especially in America where youth is idolized, we need to be reminded of this. He says, "For childhood and prime of life are vanity." If that's what makes life meaningful to you (that you look young) it is vanity. Women often don't feel good about themselves when they start getting bulges and wrinkles and varicose veins. Their feelings of worth often come from their attractiveness. Men often get the blues when they think of their balding spots or the fact that they can't play basketball as aggressively as they used to. We are so focused on physical fitness and beauty that enjoyment of life is lost when those things are lost.

Solomon says, forget that. It is the inner man that is the key to enjoying life. So don't equate happiness with physical vitality.

D. If you don't learn to enjoy life now, things won't get any better (12:1-7)

He then jumps from calling youth vanity to saying that age is vanity when it is sought for fulfillment. In 12:2-7 there is a graphic description of the deterioration of the body over time. He uses poetic language to speak of sight loss, hearing loss, taste loss, loss of teeth and strength. His point again is that if you don't start enjoying life in youth, it won't magically get better

before old age. And if you don't start in old age, you won't enjoy life before the silver cord is loosed (in other words, before you die). Chapter 11 said that "if a man lives many years and rejoices in them all". That is God's purpose for you. To enjoy life every day of your life.

E. Life before the face of God (coram Deo - 12:1,6), fear Him and submit to His Word (12:9-14)

Finally, he ends the book by calling people to live their lives in submission to God and obedience to God. In verses 9-11 (as we already saw) he calls people to the Scriptures of Christ and to the Christ of the Scriptures. It is only through Jesus that we have union with God and it is only through Jesus that we can have every spiritual blessing that has been purchased for us in Christ.

It is on the basis of being saved and secure in Christ that verses 13-14 are even possible. They say,

Eccl. 12:13 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all. 14 For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil.

The simple principle is that seeking after happiness as an end in itself is the sure way to miss happiness. When I was in Ethiopia I collected butterflies. At first I would run after them, and found it extremely difficult to catch them. Someone showed me how to catch them without chasing them, and I found I was able to catch them easily. In fact, sometimes they would come to light on my body. And that's the way it is with enjoyment of life. When we seek it as an end in itself, we ironically end up losing it. However, when we seek God as the end in Himself ironically He gives us the byproduct of happiness. Happiness is a byproduct, not a goal. The apologetics of this book lead us to that conclusion.

But never forget that God wants you to enjoy life not just to be on a rat race of productivity. Satan will make you doubt that, but God wants you to enjoy life to its fullest. The answer to the first catechism is, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." May each one of us learn how to enjoy life by enjoying God. Amen.