

LIVING LIFE
BACKWARD

HOW ECCLESIASTES TEACHES US TO LIVE

IN LIGHT OF THE END ◀ DAVID GIBSON

LET'S PRETEND

Preach the gospel. Die. Be forgotten.

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

² Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

³ What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?

⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.

⁵ The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south
and goes around to the north;
around and around goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.

⁷ All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,

there they flow again.

⁸ All things are full of weariness;
a man cannot utter it;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
nor the ear filled with hearing.

⁹ What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said,
“See, this is new”?

It has been already
in the ages before us.

¹¹ There is no remembrance of former things,
nor will there be any remembrance
of later things yet to be
among those who come after. —Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

The Explosive Gift

The development of imagination is one of the most intriguing things that happens as little toddlers begin to explore their world. Suddenly, in just a matter of weeks, the sitting room or garden in which the toddler plays becomes a zoo, a garage, a farm, a hospital, a palace, a tea party, a battlefield, a sports stadium. A world of “let’s pretend” opens up to inspire and to cultivate real understanding of the world. The toddler is ushered into new relationships and creative language by pretending to be someone he is not. If you manage to eavesdrop, you will hear all sorts of conversations as the toddler scolds and pleads and says “sorry” and “thank you” to a host of imaginary friends.

But learning the difference between the pretend world and the real world can often be a confusing process. In the real shop you can’t just buy whatever you want. In the real hospital people are actually in pain, and the doctors can’t always make everyone better. In the real world making amends is sometimes the hardest thing possible. Real tears take longer to dry.

The book of Ecclesiastes is one of God's gifts to help us live in the real world. It's a book in the Bible that gets under the radar of our thinking and acts like an incendiary device to explode our make-believe games and jolt us into realizing that everything is not as clean and tidy as the "let's-pretend" world suggests.

Ecclesiastes is the words of "the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem,"¹ and he begins with shock tactics. The very first thing he wants to tell us is that "all is vanity," "vanity of vanities." If you want readers to wake up and stop pretending about what life is like, that's a pretty good way to get their attention.

The Meaning of "Vanity"

Of course, to commence in such a direct and stark way poses its own problem. What does it mean to say everything is "vanity"?

I want to propose that many well-intended Bible translations have actually led us astray by translating the Hebrew word *hebel* as "meaningless" in this context. We tend to read this word as if it's spoken by an undergraduate philosophy student who comes home after his first year of studies and confidently announces that the universe as we know it is pointless and life has no meaning. But that is not the Preacher's perspective. He will later make statements such as "Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil" (4:6). If one course of action is *better* than another, then clearly not everything is "meaningless."

In fact, the Hebrew word *hebel* is also accurately translated as "breath" or "breeze." The Preacher is saying that everything is a mist, a vapor, a puff of wind, a bit of smoke. It's a common biblical idea:

Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.
Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath [*hebel*]
Surely a man goes about as a shadow!
Surely for nothing [*hebel*] they are in turmoil;

man heaps up wealth and does not know who will
gather!

When you discipline a man
with rebukes for sin,
you consume like a moth what is dear to him;
surely all mankind is a mere breath [*hebel*].
(Ps. 39:5–6, 11)

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)

The Preacher’s portrayal of life is this: “The merest of breaths . . . the merest of breaths. Everything is a breath.” He will take the rest of his book to unpack exactly what he means, but here are some ways to think about it.

Life Is Short

You know what happens when you blow out a candle. How long does the puff of smoke last? You can smell it and see it. It’s very real. But it is also transient, temporary, and vanishes quickly. It comes and goes without a permanent impact or a lasting impression on the world.

You have found yourself saying exactly what you used to hear older people saying all the time: “Time flies the older you get.” Your grandparents say it’s as if they blinked, and now here they are in an old person’s body. We are born, we live, we die, and it all happens so quickly. Nothing seems to last. “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting [*hebel*]” (Prov. 31:30 NIV). Joan Collins said that the problem with beauty is that it’s like being born rich and then becoming poor.

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.

Life Is Elusive

But the smoke in front of your eyes is not just transient; it is also elusive. Try to grab the smoke, put a bit in your pocket, and keep it for later. You can't get your hands on it. It is a real, physical thing, and yet it dodges your fingers as soon as they get near it; your very attempt to get hold of it blows air at the smoke and speeds its disappearance.

Ecclesiastes is a meditation on how life seems to elude our grasp in terms of lasting significance. If we try to gain control of the world and our lives by what we can understand and by what we can do, we find that the control we seek eludes us.

Consider knowledge and understanding. In some measure we can understand how the world works, but why does it always rain on the days when you don't bring your umbrella? Why is the line you don't join in the supermarket always quicker than the one you do? Why do you feel low, even when you can't really put your finger on a specific cause? Why do people you know and love die young or suffer long-term ill health while the dictator lives in prosperity into his old age?

Or consider what we do with our lives. We can pour our whole life into something, and it might succeed, or it might fail. You might land the big job in the city, and the bank might go bust the next month—you never know. How much control do you really have over whether your job is secure, or how healthy you will be, or what will happen to interest rates and house prices, over whom you will meet and what you will be doing in ten years' time?

Not long ago I was building sand castles on the beach with my daughter. With some success we built a large castle, dug a moat around it, and surrounded it with smaller castles and turrets decorated with shells. She was proud of her work, and we enjoyed being absorbed in our task. But eventually—and to her great surprise—we had to retreat as the tide encroached and the waves engulfed our handiwork. The foaming water returned our project to a knobbly patch of ordinary beach. How long do sand

castles last? And how much control do we have over the castle we have constructed? We build for a short time only, and always subject to forces beyond our control. That is what our lives are like. Instead of sand and sea, the Bible uses grass and wind to make exactly this point:

As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more. (Ps. 103:15–16)

These pictures hit home. When we consider the brevity of our lives set against the millennia of the earth, we know that what the Preacher says is true. Except, of course, in everyday life we pretend it isn't. We imagine we will live forever, or at the very least that someone else will get cancer, not us. We think our lives are built with granite, not sand. We pretend we're in control. We imagine that we can make a difference in the world and accomplish things of lasting significance. After all, that's why we go to work each day. It's also why we have a midlife crisis when we look back and see that who we are and what we've done doesn't seem to amount to very much.

And so Ecclesiastes sets out to demolish our pretense by confronting us with reality. The Preacher begins the process with a question:

What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun? (Eccles. 1:3)

This question is the key to the opening section of the book. Everything else that follows in verses 4–11 is intended as the answer. The responses to questions are often implicit and indirect in Ecclesiastes because it is part of the Bible's Wisdom Literature. This kind of writing mixes bald, direct statements (v. 2) with indirect analogies and pictorial representations (vv. 4–8), since the aim of

the writing is to reflect on the complex reality of the world as we find it.

Wisdom Literature asks, what does it mean to fear the Lord in the world the Lord has made? Along with Job, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes is a meditation on what it means to be alive in a world that God made and called good, yet which has also gone so very wrong, often in catastrophic ways. The Preacher experiments with everything around him and similarly wants us to reflect on our experience of the world. Look at your life and what's happening to you. What does that tell you about life in general? How should we make sense of it? Can we ever make sense of it? Wisdom Literature uses proverbs and pithy sayings, riddles and provocation, question and answer, prose and poetry, to force us to look at things from a different angle. Its aim is to “wound from behind.”² Like a punch in the back, it makes painful points we didn't see coming and which leave us blinking in surprise.

That's exactly what is happening here. The implied answer to the question of verse 3 is “nothing.” From a life full of labor and toil under the sun, people gain absolutely nothing. The word *gain* conveys the idea of something left over, remaining at the end. It refers to “the human desire to show a profit, to be in the black, whether financially or otherwise.”³

This is what's at stake in the question of verse 3: at the end of my life, what will the surplus be? What will I leave behind that will count as a lasting monument to all my effort?

The Preacher provides the answer by painting an incredibly stark picture. He sketches humankind's place on the canvas of the entire universe to show, in graphic terms, just how and why there is nothing to be gained. I leave only one thing behind, and that's the earth I used to live on, remaining right where it was when I first arrived, only now it spins without me. My life will come and go. If I leave children in the world to carry on my legacy, they themselves are simply part of the generations who will come and

go, and all they will leave behind is the universe carrying on as before. We haven't altered the cosmic merry-go-round. Nothing we do changes the fact that we labor and toil and then die, and the earth just stays there.

Everything is a breath, our lives the merest of breaths.

Life Is Repetitive

The Preacher pictures the momentary and elusive nature of human life with a beautiful rhythmic pattern to his poetry. Read Ecclesiastes 1:4–10 aloud and feel the lyrical tilt with its tidal ebb and flow. That's the point. Everything either goes around and around, or comes and goes; it rises and sets; what has been will be again; what has been done will be done again; what is present will soon be past.

In verses 5–8 the Preacher focuses on a threefold pattern in the world that is matched by a threefold pattern in human experience. The activities of sun, wind, and water follow the same course as the activities of speaking, seeing, and hearing. The point is that the world itself doesn't seem to go or get anywhere, for everything is cyclical rather than linear, so why should humans get anywhere?

The sun chases its tail. The wind goes to the south and comes back around again to the north. Streams flow into the sea, and the water evaporates, and then streams flow into the sea again and it is never full. So is the world, and so it will always be. So is humankind, and so we will always be. People are like the insatiable sea. Just as water pours into the ocean again and again without ever filling it, so the things of the world pour into human beings via their eyes and ears and back out through their mouths, and yet they never reach a point of complete satisfaction:

The massive reality of creation thus critiques the aspirations of all those tiny mortal beings who stand within creation as transient creatures. There is no reason to assume that individuals should “gain” from their toil when creation as a whole does not.⁴

The experience of observing constant motion without lasting achievement is so wearisome that no amount of speech can catalogue it. The eye “never reaches the point that it cannot take in more, nor does the ear become so filled with sound that it cannot accept any more impulses from the outside world.”⁵ Humans never finally think, “This is it. I’m full. I have seen it all, said it all, and heard it all. I have given out and taken in all that I can.”

This language could, of course, be extremely positive. Taken on their own, these words about the limitless capacities of the human body might point to endless potential, healthy curiosity, and childlike wonder at the world in which we live. There is always so much to see and hear. But they are followed by perhaps the most famous words in the book of Ecclesiastes:

What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun. (1:9)

The Preacher’s perspective is this: humans long to come across something in their lives that will break the constant repetitive cycle, something to say or see or hear that will be truly new and therefore significant—but there is nothing. No such thing exists. Whatever we see and hear has already been and gone, covered by the sands of time and simply rolling around again, perhaps in a different guise but fundamentally the same as before.

In *Hamlet’s BlackBerry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age*, William Powers argues that our constant connection to digital media and screen-based forms of communication is suffocating our ability to be people of substantial depth. Perhaps if anything in the world is new, then surely it’s our technology, with rapidly evolving ways of sending messages and forming virtual communities, such that we seem to be presented with new challenges for what technology means for us as persons. Not so, according to Powers: “Though we barely realize it, every day we use connective tools that were invented thousands of

years ago.” He consults seven thinkers throughout world history who each “understood the essential human urge to connect and were unusually thoughtful about the ‘screen equivalents’ of their respective epochs.”⁶ Human beings have wrestled throughout the ages with constantly changing forms of communication. There is already a rich seam of reflection on what human beings need to preserve about themselves as they interact with others. What seems new is in fact old. Hamlet used the BlackBerry of his day.⁷

The point Powers makes about the digital age applies to everything under the sun. A new government is still a government, and we’re all familiar with those. A revolution heralds a new era, and we’ve seen it all before. A new baby is still a baby, and the world has always been full of them. Even landing on the moon is still a form of adventure and exploration that has been with us since humans have walked the earth. Indeed, space travel is a good example of precisely the Preacher’s point. He doesn’t mean no “new” things are ever invented in the world, for clearly that is not true. He means there is nothing new we can ever discover to break the cycle and so satisfy us. When we conquer our solar system, humanity will then try to conquer the galaxy beyond it. We never have our fill, and that basic human impulse that led us to space in the first place “has been already in the ages before us” (v. 10). There is nothing new about humanity in the unfolding of all our progress.

Remember the Preacher’s aim. He is showing that at the end of the day, human beings gain nothing from all their toil under the sun. There’s no surplus because they are never full enough to have something left over. There’s no gain because the universe itself is cyclical and everything that is comes and goes. There’s no profit because whatever is has already been. If there’s “nothing new under the sun,” what’s the point in toiling to make or find or leave something new? It simply can’t be done.

You gain nothing from grinding your fingers to the bone, because the world will go on impervious to what you’ve done, and

it will not remember you anyway. It will not even remember the children we are yet to have (v. 11). How's that for perspective when your daughter graduates from college and your son clinches that multi-million-dollar deal?

No one will remember them.

Prepare to Die

The Preacher has answered his own question by pointing to the cyclical comings and goings of the world. His answer is that people do not gain from their labor and toil because ultimately they are going to die and be forgotten. Life stretches ahead of the young employee with dreams of a fulfilling career and a happy family; but it will all come and go. She is going to die and will not be remembered.

Many interpreters of Ecclesiastes suggest the Preacher is simply presenting something that is true only if life is lived without God. They understand the phrase “under the sun” to signify the secularist’s perspective. If we consider life without God in the frame and look at the world as we see it, that is, under the sun, then there is no alternative but to say that everything is a mere breath. The Preacher, however, wants us to know that “under the sun” is not all there is. And so we may well want to ask: surely the Christian way of looking at life is different? If I’m a follower of the Lord Jesus, doesn’t that change everything?

Well, it is true that knowing Christ does provide a whole new angle—the true angle—on what it means to be alive. We will see how Ecclesiastes points us to this. It’s certainly true that for the Preacher the world under the sun is not all there is, and he has things to say that will radically alter our perspective on this life.

But in the poetry that opens his book the Preacher is not commenting on what life is like without Christ. He is not saying this repetitive roundabout is what life is like from a secularist perspective. This is not what the world feels like from the viewpoint of existential nihilism, or postmodern navel gazing. It’s just what the

world is like. It's reality. It's the same for everyone, Christian or non-Christian, adherent or atheist: we each live under the sun.

In fact, it's probably better to see that phrase as a temporal marker more than a spatial marker: "In Scripture, the sun is a marker of time (Gen. 1:14) and the phrase 'under the sun' . . . refers to a *now* rather than a *there*."⁸ It's a way of saying that for as long as the earth lasts, in this period of time, this is how things are. This side of eternity, life is a breath. We do the same things over and over again in a world repeating itself over and over again, and then we die, only to be followed by our children who will do the same things in the same way and then meet the same end.

Being a Christian doesn't stop this being true. Rather, it should make us the first to stop pretending that it isn't true. That is the Preacher's aim. It may not make perfect sense to us yet, but he is carefully laying the foundations for the main argument of his book: only preparing to die will teach us how to live. And part of establishing that argument is the very simple point of 1:1–11. In these days, under the sun, it is unavoidably true that we live in a world where we will soon be dead.

Learn to Live

The Preacher wants us to let the reality of our death sink into our bones and lodge itself deep in our hearts. But that's because he's writing a book about what it means to live. He wants the consequences of our fast-approaching disappearance from the earth to work their way out into all the realities of the way we see the world and the way we view ourselves within that world. The single question that animates him is this: If we won't live forever, or even long enough to make a lasting difference to the world, how then should we live?

It takes the whole of Ecclesiastes to answer that question, and I want to unpack it in the successive chapters of this book. The argument is cumulative, and we need to allow the Preacher to make his case bit by bit, like an artist painting on a canvas.

At the outset, 1:1–11 sketches a very basic point: accepting death is the first step in learning to live. Wise people simply accept that they are going to die. As Douglas Wilson puts it, “A wise believer is a man who knows the length of his tether.”⁹ This point may seem so obvious as to be simplistic. But, in fact, it’s highly significant when we stop and think about how much energy we devote to not accepting it.

The reality is, we spend our lives trying to escape the constraints of our created condition. Opening our eyes to this is a significant breakthrough. To be human is to be a creature, and to be a creature is to be finite. We are not God. We are not in control, and we will not live forever. We will die. But we avoid this reality by playing “let’s pretend.”

Let’s pretend that if we get the promotion, or see our church grow, or bring up good children, we’ll feel significant and leave a lasting legacy behind us. Let’s pretend that if we change jobs, or emigrate to the sun, we won’t experience the humdrum tedium and ordinariness of life. Let’s pretend that if we move to a new house, we’ll be happier and will never want to move again. Let’s pretend that if we end one relationship and start a new one, we won’t ever feel trapped. Let’s pretend that if we were married, or weren’t married, we would be content. Let’s pretend that if we had more money, we would be satisfied. Let’s pretend that if we get through this week’s pile of washing and dirty diapers and shopping lists and school runs and busy evenings, next week will be quieter. Let’s pretend that time is always on our side to do the things we want to do and become the people we want to be. Let’s pretend we can break the cycle of repetition and finally arrive in a world free from weariness.

We long for change in a world of permanent repetition, and we dream of how to interrupt it. We long for lives of permanence in a world of constant change, and we strive to achieve it. We spend our lives aligning our better selves with a different future that we envisage as more rewarding. And in it all we are simply trying to

make permanent what is not meant to be permanent (us), and by constant change we are trying to control what is not meant to be controlled (the world). The seasons and natural cycles of the world are content to come and go, but we sweat and toil to make believe that it will not be so with us.

Ecclesiastes urges us to put this behind us once and for all and adopt a better way of thinking. Stop playing “let’s pretend” and instead let history and the created world be our teachers. Think about the generations who lived before us. Look at the tides and the seasons and the patterns that God has stitched into the very fabric of creation. Things repeat themselves over and over and over again, and so it is time to learn that life has a repetitiveness built into it which we are not meant to try to escape. The very rhythms of the world are a pointer to what it means to be part of the created order as a human being. Stop thinking that meaning and happiness and satisfaction reside in novelty. What is new is not really new, and what feels new will soon feel old.

C. S. Lewis captured the essence of this point in his book *The Screwtape Letters*. A senior devil, Screwtape, is writing to his junior devil nephew, Wormwood, with advice on how to get Christians to turn away from the Enemy (God). Screwtape counsels Wormwood on humanity’s constant desire to experience something new:

The horror of the Same Old Thing is one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart—an endless source of heresies in religion, folly in counsel, infidelity in marriage, and inconstancy in friendship.¹⁰

God has made change and newness pleasurable to human beings. But, says Screwtape, because God does not want his creatures “to make change, any more than eating, an end in itself, He has balanced the love of change in them by a love of permanence.”¹¹ Change and constancy are the two balancing weights on the seesaw of human experience, and God has given humanity the means

to enjoy both of them by patterning the world with rhythm. We love the fact that springtime feels *new*; we love the fact that it is springtime *again*. And the Devil goes to work right at this point.

Screwtape explains:

Now just as we pick out and exaggerate the pleasure of eating to produce gluttony, so we pick out this natural pleasantness of change and twist it into a demand for absolute novelty. This demand is entirely our workmanship. If we neglect our duty, men will be not only contented but transported by the mixed novelty and familiarity of snowdrops *this* January, sunrise *this* morning, plum pudding *this* Christmas. Children, until we have taught them better, will be perfectly happy with a seasonal round of games in which conkers succeed hopscotch as regularly as autumn follows summer. Only by our incessant efforts is the demand for infinite, or unrhythmical, change kept up.¹²

This is exactly what the Preacher wants us to spot. Where we are unsatisfied with the rhythmical repetition of our lives, it is because we are pretending that things should not be like this for us as human beings. To want infinite change—in other words, to “gain” something—is to want to escape the confines of ordinary existence and somehow arrive in a world where, on the one hand, repetition does not occur and, on the other, permanence for our lives does. But neither is possible. As we search for something new under the sun, so we are searching for absolute novelty, and it does not exist: “The pleasure of novelty is by its very nature more subject than any other to the law of diminishing returns.”¹³

When you think that at last you’ve made a decisive change in your circumstances, you will soon want to change something else. Whatever it is you think you’ve gained, it will soon vanish from the earth like morning mist, and you along with it too. Part of learning to live is simply accepting this. One day you will be dead and gone, and the world will go on, probably without even

remembering you. A hundred years after your death, the chances are, no one will ever know you lived.

If this depresses you, then keep reading. There's still a lot to learn. But if it cracks a wry smile on your face, you're halfway to happiness. For the Preacher is going to show us what we should, and should not, expect out of life. He is not just saying there's no gain after we've chased the wind; he will insist there's no need for the chase in the first place. There is no gain to be had under the sun, and that's precisely the point.

None need be sought.

Questions for Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. What are your impressions of the book of Ecclesiastes?
2. Explain the meaning of "vanity" in Ecclesiastes in your own words.
3. List three things you would like to change about your life and three things you would like to stay the same.
4. Can you think of instances when you felt you had "gained," only to find that in time you were dissatisfied again?
5. How can it be liberating, rather than frustrating, to know that life is repetitive?
6. Do you find the message of this first chapter depressing or promising?