

Like is Smoke

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Date: 04 October 2020

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[0 : 00] Now, there was a poet, 100 and some years ago, called John Keats. You've likely heard of him if you've taken any literature classes or anything of this sort.

He had a very early death. I think he was 27, 28 years old when he died. And before he died, he wrote a sonnet reflecting on his coming death.

And it's called, When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be. And this poem is about two things that John Keats lived for, the things that gave his life significance.

Romantic love and fame. He contemplates romantic love and fame in the light of his death in this poem. And the last two lines read like this.

Then, on the shore of the wide world, I stand alone and think, till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

[1 : 06] Keats knew that everything he built his life around, everything he staked his meaning on, would one day count for nothing.

He constantly sought after significance, after meaning, after something of value in his life. He wanted to make a difference. He wanted to last. But he knew that time and death would wash it all away.

It was all vanity. Love and fame to nothingness do sink. When he died, Keats left in writing a request to his friends that they make an engraving on his tombstone.

And they did. And what he wanted engraved was this. Here lies one whose name was writ in water. He knew that even if he were famous one day, even if his poems and sonnets were read 150 years later, eventually time and death would wash it all away and his name was writ in water.

[2 : 16] Keats thought of ultimate reality as time and death just eating away at everything we love. And Ecclesiastes is a book which wrestles with that idea.

So Ecclesiastes is a recording of the words of a man who calls himself Koheleth in Hebrew.

Koheleth might be translated in your Bible as preacher or the teacher.

Sinclair Ferguson calls him the pundit because Koheleth is essentially, he's a public intellectual.

Koheleth is a public intellectual. So he is concerned not just with deep thoughts but actually communicating those thoughts to the public, to us. He's a teacher. He's a preacher.

Richard Dawkins is another public intellectual who's no preacher. He's an atheist. And Richard, here's what Richard Dawkins says about ultimate reality.

[3 : 19] He says ultimate reality is cold and indifferent. He writes this, the total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation.

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt.

Other people are going to get lucky. And you won't find any rhyme or reason in it nor any justice.

The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

How's that for cheery? At bottom he says nothing but pitiless indifference. You gotta hand it to him. Dawkins is consistent with his worldview, isn't he?

Starting from the premise that there's no God, he faces the harsh realities of this world and he comes to this conclusion, life is pointless.

[4 : 31] Koheleth in Ecclesiastes faces with the same unflinching honesty, the reality around us, and he comes to this conclusion, life is vapor.

The word that we read in the ESV, vanity, vanity of vanities, is a Hebrew word, hevel. I promise I'm not going to teach you too many Hebrew words.

The word, hevel, is important. Hevel is used 38 times in Ecclesiastes. It's used many, many, many times in the Hebrew Bible. And its literal meaning is vapor, like your breath on a cold day.

The reason it's translated differently is because it's almost always used metaphorically. So vapor is an image for something. Now I don't actually think, and scholars tend to generally agree, that any one English translation is really going to capture all of the nuance of the metaphor.

So as we go through Ecclesiastes, I'm just going to refer to it as vapor or hevel. But I want you to know what I'm talking about when if you're reading the ESV and it says vanity or NIV and it might say meaningless.

[5 : 49] But we're going to talk about vapor because the word hevel is like a character in a good book, a character that begins with a certain set of traits. And as the story unfolds, as the plot unfolds, you learn more and more, this character becomes more of a nuanced, sophisticated picture of a person.

Hevel is like that. Traveling through the book of Ecclesiastes, the metaphor is going to pick up color. It's going to pick up meaning. Like my daughters, when we go for walks, stoop down every couple of minutes and pick up little stones and put them in their pockets.

So we're just going to go on a journey through Ecclesiastes together and pick up some stones along the way and see how full our pockets are at the end.

Now if you walk out on a crisp, say in about a month, and it gets really cold, well, really cold for Scotland. You walk out and take a big breath and you exhale and you see vapor come out of your mouth.

Vapor shows that you're alive. Your breath shows that you're alive. But like life's qualities, like life's purpose, it kind of, it's hard to get a hold of, isn't it?

[7 : 02] And it's soon gone. It vanishes. Life says, Kohalith is vapor. If you blow out a candle, what do you see?

You see a wisp of smoke, like vapor. It's here for a moment and then it's gone.

It looks solid as it kind of twists and turns, doesn't it? But you know, if my two-year-old were there, she might try to grab it, but it would just slip through her fingers. You can't get a hold on it because it's vapor.

It leaves no lasting impression on the world around it, no noticeable one to us. The candle can be burning, bright, the flame beautiful, it smells good.

You blow it out and it's gone. You would have never known it was lit in the first place. Life is vapor.

[8 : 06] Now I said this word is used 38 times. That's important. The first and last times, the word is doubled, which in Hebrew is the way that you really emphasize something.

That's why the ESV says vanity of vanities. NIV says meaningless, meaningless. When you double the word, it really exponentially amplifies the effect that that word has.

Now the word, hevel or vapor, is doubled once at the beginning of the book and once at the end of the book. So actually vapor are the bookends to this book.

If there's a theme to Ecclesiastes, it's this. Life is vapor. Now there's another key phrase that we need to understand, and it's in chapter one, verse three.

Look at it with me. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

[9 : 06] Under the sun is a very important phrase to wrap our minds around the difficult message of Ecclesiastes. Under the sun, it occurs, I don't know, some two dozen times, but it decreases in frequency as you go through the book.

We'll talk more about that later on. But life under the sun, imagine from an ancient Israelite perspective, God and heaven are past the sun.

They're above the sun. Everything that you know of your existence, the material world that you live in that's real and tangible to you is everything under the sun.

That's the concept that the preacher is examining what is life like not above the sun, but under the sun.

In other words, he's actually dealing with the question that Dawkins is dealing with, what if this is all there is?

[10 : 13] Or like Dawkins would say, at the bottom of this reality, do we find anything but pitiless indifference and coldness? Now, under the sun in this life, there are two monsters that stand in everybody's path.

One is time and one is death. Let's look again at chapter one, verses two to, I don't know, eight. We'll read one, two to eight again. 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?

A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south, goes around to the north, round and round goes the wind and on it circuits the wind returns.

All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it.

[11 : 25] The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear filled with hearing. He talks about four things here. He talks about generations.

He talks about the sun. He talks about the wind and he talks about the water. So he says, generations, think of it. With this monster of time, babies are born and become adults and have babies and grow old and die.

And their babies become adults and have babies and grow old and die. And rinse and repeat. Endless cycles. The sun rises and sets and rises and sets and it always has done it.

It always will do as long as this universe remains. The wind just blows around and around this world, sees the same things over and over and over again on its circuits.

In water, the streams empty into the ocean, which has never fall because it just empties back out into the streams which empty into the ocean.

[12 : 27] And he looks at all of this and he says, weary. If time is just like an hourglass being flipped back and forth, if we're doomed to repeat history, what's the purpose behind any of this?

So that's the first monster, time. The second is death. Turn again to chapter 11.

Starting in verse 7. No, let's go back, actually let's go to chapter 12, starting in 1. Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years drawn nigh of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them.

He's speaking of aging. He's speaking very honestly about aging. Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and clouds return after the rain, the keepers of the house tremble, strong men are bent, the grinder cease, those who look out the windows are dimmed, etc. Down to verse 7. And the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

[13 : 54] Vanity of vanity, says the preacher, all is vanity. Look how brutally honest he is. It's kind of refreshing, isn't it?

He looks at aging, at death, at infirmity, fragility, and he just says it like it is.

And it's a little hard to hear, isn't it? Even the most youthful, the strongest, the most successful, the most admired, the wealthiest people all will face death, this second monster.

So like Keats, we have to ask if everything that we measure ourselves by in this life will be swallowed up in death, what's the point?

If I asked you to go sit in an empty room, no, if I said to go stand in an empty room on one leg for two hours, and that's all the information I gave you, you would say, why?

[15 : 06] Why would you ask me to do that? What's the point? What's the significance of doing this? What's the purpose of just standing on one foot for two hours in an empty room?

What do I gain out of it? You'd be right to ask. The preacher says, let's be honest about reality. If someone were to ask you to do a pointless task, you'd question it, but why don't we question our very lives that we live with the same kind of honesty?

I wonder if it's fear. When all is said and done, what's the point? Now we all want to understand the purpose that drives our lives, don't we?

So we want to know what we're living for. We need something. We all need something that gives our lives significance, that gives our lives value and meaning.

We need to know what we're living for, but we also need to know why life happens to us the way that it does. Why do good things happen to bad people and bad things to good people?

[16 : 21] Why did I have to lose my job? Why am I still single when I don't want to be? Why isn't my marriage all that I thought it would be?

Why can't I stop sinning? Why is there a global pandemic in this day and age?

Is ultimate reality cold and indifferent after all? Is life pointless? No. Co-Heleth winks at us and says, life is vapor.

That for Co-Heleth, for the preacher, is life under the sun. He's winking at us. He's teaching us. He's guiding us. And he's showing us, while he's leading us past our atheistic tendencies, our godless ways of thinking, he's leading us to something a lot better.

By the end of the book, as I said, Co-Heleth stops using the phrase under the sun. Why? Well, in the passage we just read, the depressing part, in chapter 12, we find a clue.

[17 : 38] Look at the first verse, please, of chapter 12. Remember also your Creator.

That word drops into Ecclesiastes like a bomb. It changes everything. The fact that we are created, not that we are merely random accidents under the sun, is key, our creatureliness is key, because it means that life under the sun is not random.

It means that behind everything that you see around you is a beautiful mind, is reason, is purpose. Well, if there's a reason, why can't we understand it? Creatureliness is key.

The fact that there's a Creator means that you are the created, which means stop trying to grasp the smoke from the candle that you've just blown out.

[18 : 49] Life is vapor, but we have a Creator. Now in chapter 1, Coeeth asks a very serious question in verse 3.

He says, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? What does he gain? In other words, when all is said and done, what will last?

What will ultimately matter? What will outlast me? What does man gain?

We're obsessed with gain as humans. We're obsessed with profit, aren't we? Well, Coeeth, the preacher, redirects our attention from gain to gift.

From gain to gift, and that's the last word I want to draw your attention to. Look at chapter 12, verse 7, and we'll stop flipping back and forth after this. Chapter 12, verse 7, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

[20 : 04] This vaporous, enigmatic life is gift. More than a dozen times in this book, the preacher unfolds to us this truth that God, our Creator, gives us gifts, including, here's some of the things that Coeeth says are gifts of God, food, wine, and toil.

He doesn't say easy, pleasant work. He says, toil. A life to live, eternity in your heart, a pole that there's something more, intimate companions, a good wife, spouses, friendship, and our very breath, our spirit, and ultimately wise words.

This is a wisdom literature book. That's its genre. These are wise words, a gift from God to help us navigate this vaporous life.

Now, at this point, though, we might be tempted to think that the word vapor introduced in the beginning of the book might also fade away by the end of the book because it's so negative.

We would be wrong. Coeeth, the preacher continues to insist that even this creaturely life, which is a gift, is also a vapor.

[21 : 34] At the end of chapter 11, he says, we're to rejoice in all of it. This is at verse 8. He says, if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all, but remember, the days of darkness will be many.

He doesn't say if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in the good ones because there will be lots of dark ones. He says, rejoice in them all. The days of darkness where the grasshopper drags itself along the ground and the days of youth and strength and light where the windows remain undimmed, rejoice in them all.

Life is a vapor, and every ounce of our vaporous lives is gift from a God who loves you.

So we say, life is pointless, cold, and indifferent, but Coeeth says no. Life is a gift from your

Creator. And we say, sure, the rare times that are good are a gift, but what about the suffering?

What about all the stuff I can't make sense of? Coeeth says no. All of life is gift. Each day, all the pleasure and pain and ease and frustration in each day is a gift from the hand of a God who loves you and is in absolute control.

[23 : 01] But life's an enigma. You won't be able to make sense of it all. You're not the Creator. But when you accept life as a gift, you'll really begin to live it and to love it, to rejoice in it, as Coeeth says we ought to do so many times.

So that means the poor person's lot in life is God's gift to him. And the wealthy person's lot in life is God's gift to her.

Here is a gift, and suffering is a gift, even when we can't make sense of it.

I told you it was a weird book. What is it doing in our Bibles? I mean, it feels so modern, doesn't it? Wrestling with these sorts of questions. Ultimately, I think Ecclesiastes is a book of questions and not a book of answers.

The role of Coeleth in the Bible isn't to be the one who ties it all together. He's a wise man who's pointing us to the very wisdom of God.

[24 : 16] He's pointing us toward the rest of the Bible as a place to find answers. Ultimately, Coeleth is pointing us to Jesus. Because Jesus, our Creator's greatest gift, is Jesus.

His greatest gift to us. Our only gain. What can a man gain by all this toil? Well, our only gain and our greatest gain is Jesus.

Jesus teaches us that gain is loss, and loss is gain, and life is by death. The only and greatest gain then in life is Jesus and life with him, now and forever, eternity.

John 12, 25, and 26 says, whoever, this is Jesus speaking to his disciples, whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

If anyone serves me, he must follow me, and where I am, there my servant will be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

[25 : 31] So, following Jesus, we find gain is loss. Loss is gain. Life is through death. Everything is turned upside down. Jesus, Jesus with us, Jesus for us, makes every painful and pleasurable moment in our lives buzz with significance, tingling with meaning and purpose and value, because every ounce of suffering, for instance, is a gift, an opportunity for us to better know, better love Jesus, to receive comforts from the heart of the eternal triune God himself, and be certain of his love for us, even in the darkest times, we can find the brightest lights.

Every ounce of suffering is an opportunity to get nearer to Jesus. That doesn't mean you'll understand it all.

Life is vapor, but every vaporous breath is a reminder that life is a gift. God has given you a complicated, messy, beautiful life to live to his glory and to your joy, believe it or not, which will last forever if you trust in Jesus.

He gives us tremendous significance, even our lives. I mentioned John Keats at the beginning.

The full tombstone, I'll read the whole engraving to you just now. His tombstone, which you can find to this day, reads this. This grave contains all that was mortal of a young English poet who, on his deathbed, in the bitterness of his heart at the malicious power of his enemies, desired these words to be engraved on his tombstone.

[27 : 33] Here lies one whose name was writ in water. A close friend of Keats was out of town when his other friends engraved that tombstone, and he came back and thought it painted his dear friend in a very negative light.

He suggested they'd remove the tombstone and carve a new one with these new words. This short life was so embittered by discouragement and sickness that he desired these words to mark his grave.

Here lies one whose name is writ in water. Him having reversed this sentence, his friends and admirers now inscribe his name in marble.

They didn't take his suggestions. Keats' name remains writ in water. Ultimately, we all fear that our names will be writ in water.

We might not desire the fame that he did, but we do desire to matter. We fear that we're insignificant, that we don't have any value, that we don't add anything, that when all is said and done, there will be nothing left.

[28 : 42] Love and fame to nothing that's due sink. But you matter to God. You always have.

You matter so much to God that the Creator wrote himself into the story to save you. And He sent Jesus, His Son, to live with those two monsters under the sun, time and death.

Jesus entered into time. He entered into our broken cycles of history, and He changed it forever. If there's a center of time, a pivot moment, when the world as we know it changed forever, it was when Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem.

Now you might also read this book of Ecclesiastes and think, it's wise and good to live in light of your death, and it is. Not morbidly, but we must be aware of our end that we all will face.

Nobody lived more in light of their death than Jesus of Nazareth. His whole purpose on life was to die for you.

[29 : 57] He didn't die like we die, though. He died worse than we die. He died a cosmic death. His death was such so that now if we're in Christ, our death is spoken of as just falling asleep in the Lord.

The Son of God, abandoned by the Father willingly to pay the price for your sins and mine, so we wouldn't have to.

And if you trust in Jesus for your significance, if you trust Jesus to save you from your own life under the sun, with all your sin and brokenness and confusion, he'll save you.

He'll be your nearest friend, and he will prepare a place for you with him in eternity. And then you'll be able to say, here lives one whose name is writ in marble.

Let's pray. Father, we confess to you now that we, every one of us, have grasped after meaning and significance and value and purpose in a thousand wrong ways.

[31 : 17] And we admit now, Lord, help us to admit now to our own selves, that everyone has left us empty.

We look to you as the only thing that can fill, the only thing that can satisfy the bread of life, living water unending.

Father give us a thirst and a hunger for Christ. Amen.