

STUDY 2 || ECCLESIASTES 1&2

GRASPING AT GAIN

Welcome to the book of Ecclesiastes! This wisdom book is an exploration of the world we live in every day. It looks at the world left to us by the events of Genesis 2 and 3 and asks, “What do we do in a world like this?” In a world that was **made good** but has been **broken by sin** and is also **under a curse**, what's the best way to approach life? What gains can I secure in my life and career ‘under the sun’?

Before we begin, there's one bit of information we're going to need – the key word of Ecclesiastes: vapour.

Five of the first eight words spoken by ‘the Teacher’ (chapter 1 verse 2) are the same Hebrew word, *‘hevel’*. In fact his opinion is that everything is *‘hevel’*. So whatever this word *‘hevel’* means (and it appears over 35 times in Ecclesiastes!), understanding it well will help us to understand the book.

‘Hevel’ literally means ‘vapour’ or ‘mist’.

“Mist of mists, says the Teacher. Misty vaporous breath. Everything is vapour.”

Ever tried holding mist in your hands? Or grasping a plume of breath on a cold morning? Exactly. You can't do it.

The Teacher says that many things in life are like *hevel* - a vapour you can't grasp hold of. They might stay briefly, or even for a while, but never forever. Our NIV bibles translate *hevel* as “meaningless” ... but as you read Ecclesiastes instead think “vapour.” It's not about lack of meaning, but lack of substance and permanence.

What does the word ‘vapour’ make you think of? What can you do with vapour? What can't you do with it?

In what ways can life be like vapour?

THE TEACHER'S HYPOTHESIS

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11.

1. What question is the Teacher setting out to answer? (verse 3)

2. According to verses 4-11, what's the answer and why?

THE TEACHER'S METHOD

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12-18.

3. The Teacher tells us his method of investigation. What is the scope of the Teacher's investigation? What tools does he apply in investigating it?

4. In Genesis 2-3 we saw that creation was broken. How optimistic is the Teacher that this brokenness can be fixed? (verses 14-18)

THE TEACHER'S EXPERIMENTS

If life 'under the sun' is now warped in ways that we can't fix, then what's good to do under the sun? The Teacher decides to test out three candidates: pleasure, wisdom and success.

Read Ecclesiastes 2:1-23.

5. What does the Teacher discover when he explores what can be gained by:

a) Pleasure? (verses 1-11)

b) Wisdom? (verses 12-16)

c) Success, achievements and the trappings that come with them?
(verses 17-23)

6. What was the result of the Teacher's attempt to secure lasting gain from his toil and control its outcomes?

ANOTHER APPROACH

The Teacher concludes that pleasure, wisdom and success are all vapour: you can't hold onto them. There's nothing to gain. In fact, when he tried to, it just made him hate the pleasure and achievements he was trying to secure, because he knew that he couldn't tie them down! But even in this life, he suggests that there's a way to live with at least a glimmer of joy.

Read Ecclesiastes 2:24-26.

7. What does the Teacher say is the best way for humans to live in this broken and frustrated world?



Securing Gain v. Receiving Gifts - An Illustration

The Teacher presents two options for approaching life. You either live on the treadmill trying to secure and store up 'gain' or you receive what life gives you as a 'gift', knowing that you can't reliably secure anything.

When a stunning spring butterfly lands on your outstretched palm, you might be tempted to grab it so it doesn't fly away. But if you do, you'll spoil the very thing you're trying to hold on to. So what do you do?

"Keep an open hand," says the Teacher. Enjoy the time that you have to admire and enjoy the butterfly as a gift, with no attempt to gain, grasp or secure it long term. The best we can do, he says, is to enjoy the moment, for whatever vaporous moments we're given.

It's the Teacher's best solution for a difficult life, and for many people it's as good as it gets. Followers of Jesus will notice it's similar to his advice to not be anxious about clothes and food (Matthew 6:25) and his warning against the danger of **gaining the world** but losing your soul (Mark 8:36).

GOSPEL WISDOM

The Teacher explores how far human wisdom can go in fixing a broken, unfixable world. The answer is: not very far! So he falls back on receiving life as a gift from God. That life is still broken by sin and death, but you may as well enjoy what you can. The situation changes, however, with the arrival of Jesus and the gospel. The good news is that Jesus will defeat death and his kingdom will last forever, unlike the achievements of the Teacher.

So what wisdom does Jesus give for living in a world that's still broken, but where he is the risen King and will one day make that world new? Read the two passages in the *sidebar*.

Matthew 6:31-33

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Mark 8:34-37

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

8. How is the attitude that Jesus commands in these passages similar to the philosophy of the Teacher of Ecclesiastes?

9. How would a life lived by the words of Jesus be *different* to a life lived in the wisdom of the Teacher?

With the coming of the kingdom in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, death is defeated and the curse will be reversed. Striving to secure our future in this world is still like trying to catch hold of vapour - but Jesus has secured eternity for those who trust him. Why worry, when your soul is safe with the King of the new kingdom?