

Smoke Rings and Sandcastles – *Eccles 1:2-11*

Introduction – You have already forgotten most of your life. One example: something like 95% of what is said in a sermon is forgotten by more than 95% of the congregation by mid-week. All of us will work very hard at something this week; all will struggle deeply with certain trials; all will reap the fruit of their labor or lack thereof. Every choice we make will in one way or another change the course of our life forever. And yet, “What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?” – v3.

Vanity of Vanities (v2) – Since this word is used so many times in this book, it is very important for us to understand its meaning as Solomon is using it. He does not mean vanity like Vanity Fair in Pilgrim’s Progress, or like a vanity-mirror in a woman’s dressing room. Nor does he mean “meaningless” as some translate it in the sense of absolute meaninglessness. Elsewhere, the Word instructs us that God has predestined everything; therefore, God has particular meaning and purpose for everything that takes place. But these, ultimately, are the secret things of God (Deut 29:29) and are inscrutable for finite creatures (this is part of the argument that God makes with Job, i.e. Job 38:4). Nor is Solomon only saying that life is meaningless to the unbeliever (which, in one sense, is true). Rather, he is arguing that all of life is “*hebel*” for all of us under the sun.

Vapor of Vapors – In his excellent commentary, Jeff Meyers argues for the translation “*vapor*” for “*hebel*” in Ecclesiastes. This is an appropriate translation for the word, which is used exactly this way in other places (NKJV - “*breath*” in Is 57:13 and Jer 10:15 “*fantasy*” in Prov 21:6). This translation brings out the parallelism Solomon intended in, for instance, the end of 2:26, “This also is vanity (vapor, a mist), and grasping for the wind.” The use of the word in 1:2 is in the superlative as well; like “Holy of holies” or “King of kings,” so we have here, “vapor of vapors” – imagine a dark, London fog.

Inscrutable Repetition (vv4-8) – What profit is there for all that we do? Regardless of what goes on in our lives, the next generation will come and we’ll be gone (v4), the sun will go up and down (v5), the wind will blow one way and then another (v6), the rain will pour down, run into the sea, be evaporated up into the clouds, and rain again (v7). Creation all around us works, like we do, and when its done, it just does it again. Like blowing smoke rings or building sandcastles, life cannot be grasped, stopped, or contained. Like the bunny in the battery commercials, it just keeps running.

Innovation and Immortality (vv9-11) – We try to break free from this incessant spinning by acting as though it doesn’t exist. We exclaim that we have a new innovation that will change everything. But even that announcement is a misty repetition. We seek for our 5 minutes of fame, but who will really ever remember anything about you in a millennia or two? “*Eventually, everything is forgotten. Just ask a child where the term “dial tone” came from, or why we say some people “sound like a broken record”*” – Meyers.

Guard Yourself – There are a couple things to keep in mind. First of all, while we cannot make ultimate sense (or sometimes any sense at all) of what goes on in our lives, Solomon is not saying that God does not have meaning. There are mysterious, secret things (Deut 29:29), but all things are in His hand and under His control (Rom 8:28). This is not a declaration of absolute meaningless. It is the beginning of an argument that says that satisfaction/enjoyment/meaning cannot come from anything within man’s power. To see this, let’s look ahead to the end of this first division.

Eccles 2:24-25 (*italics are a suggested change in translation*) – “*There is not a good in man 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. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, apart from Him?*” Remember our summary from the introduction – God has predestined vanity (a vapor, a mist) under the sun, and, we can only enjoy our portion if God gives us the gift of enjoyment.

Rushing to the Other Error – Second, we must be careful not to careen the other way, believing that we can place meaning on anything and everything. James warns us against making prophetic declarations about our lives, which are but a vapor (James 4:13-16). Sometimes the reason something has occurred is to be understood (i.e. Prov 24:30-34) and only the fool ignores the truth. But even there, all of the reasons are not revealed; and often no reason at all is obvious (“*Why was this man born blind?*” – John 9). Every action we take leads to an infinite number of successive complementary actions – but this can’t freeze us up.

Ecclesiastes in a Day of Control Freaks – We are a culture of control freaks, let’s admit it. We want to precisely control when we rise and when we go to bed. We want the room at a precise temperature, and we want to stop El Nino and global warming through legislation. Everything in our lives is supposed to have been planned and have a particular purpose. Now, the fact of the matter is that it does, but God does not reveal most of what those plans or purposes are. What He does give us is the gift of enjoying the labor and its fruit, giving thanks by faith in the mist. We can blow another smoke ring, make another sandcastle (because that’s about all our lives are – under the sun) and really, truly, deeply enjoy them.