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Ecclesiastes 1:2-3, NRSV.

- ² *Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*
- ³ *What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?*

Epicurus and Solomon: *Under the Sun and Under God.*

I'll start with a very quick overview of a book we recently looked at. According to the text of Ecclesiastes, the author is "*Qoheleth*", which is a title, not a name. In Hebrew the word means "*one who speaks to an assembly*", and it could be roughly translated as "*teacher*". Sometimes, such as in the English Standard Version, this is translated as "*Preacher*". The author also implies that he is the son of King David, as well as a king himself, which would mean that the author would have to be King Solomon. The writing in the book is the sort of writing we might expect of Solomon, given what the Kings, Chronicles, and Samuel books tell us about him. The book shows a penetrating knowledge of the Wisdom literature, and historically, Solomon has been attributed with possibly writing much of, or at least collecting, the works of the Sages. The book is rather enigmatic. Ecclesiastes is a blend of traditional theological statements and quite

jaded, bitter statements about the author's experiences in life. The author tells us that human endeavors run in cycles – and that when we think we have finally attained some sought-after goal, we discover that nothing in our life has changed. We think that Ecclesiastes was written around 250 B.C., that is 700 years after the life of Solomon, who was king from 970 B.C. to 931 B.C. This would mean that the book was written during the Hellenization of Israel, the period that led to the New Testament being written in Greek. Given its views on the human experience, many believe that Ecclesiastes shows a striking parallel with Greek philosophical thought. People see in Ecclesiastes Epicureanism, a way of thinking founded by Epicurus around 300 B.C. Ecclesiastes argues for a middle way in life, with accepting moderate pleasure as a gift from God, rather than pursuing deep meaning in life. People also see some Stoicism in Ecclesiastes, another area of Greek thought dating to around 300 B.C. Ecclesiastes, like Stoicism, argues that human existence can be futile and that we need to accept what cannot be controlled. In some eyes, Ecclesiastes is the philosophy book of the Bible, and I'll get back to this issue of Epicureanism. But Ecclesiastes is also rooted in a deep faith in God. Ecclesiastes tells us that morality should be unconditional and not based on any expected rewards from God, and that importantly, we'll be misled if

we expect any rewards will necessarily come in this life. We should love God, be thankful for the daily pleasures that God gives us and accept the fate of death.

When I was at Occidental College in L.A., a rather long time ago, we were required to take a one-year sequence, in three trimesters, in some area of thought. I had never studied philosophy. I somewhat arbitrarily chose Greek philosophy and literature. Since then, it's caused me to have an interest in Ecclesiastes. It is in some sense the intellectual's Wisdom book of the Bible. It doesn't just tell us that living by God's laws will give us a life of joy. We must admit that even for the person of faith, life is complicated.

These are verses 2 and 3 of the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV):

- ² *Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*
³ *What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?*

Here is the New International Version (NIV) version of these verses:

- ² *"Meaningless! Meaningless!"
says the Teacher.
"Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless."
³ *What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?**

Here are these verses from the Common English Bible (CEB):

² *Perfectly pointless, says the Teacher,
perfectly pointless.*

Everything is pointless.

³ *What do people gain
from all the hard work
that they work so hard at under the sun?*

What is that word, which is translated as “Vanity” or “Meaningless” or “Perfectly pointless” in the original Hebrew? It’s “*hă-bêl*”. The word means “vapor” or “smoke” or “mist”. It’s a beautiful word for a philosophical book. The author is not saying that life is vain, that no matter what we’re going to fail. He’s not saying that there is no meaning in life. He is not saying that life is pointless - far from it. The author is saying that you need to be careful, humble. Just when you think you have grabbed onto something new and worthwhile and rewarding, it slips through your fingers like vapor. Importantly, “*under the sun*” has a specific meaning; it’s not just poetry. It refers to life literally under our sun, in other words, on Earth, in the human world. We can therefore read these verses in a positive fashion: if you want what you grab to remain in your hands, to be valuable and worth working for, seek things in God’s world. Work on your spiritual life. Why? This life “*under the sun*” is fleeting. The author uses the word “*hă-bêl*” 38 times. The teacher, the preacher, the speaker says that the world is filled with goodness and with beautiful things, but when we focus only on

enjoying what we can get in this life, something comes along and takes our happiness away. What we had turns to “vapor”, “smoke”, “mist”.

Here is the end of the second Chapter of Ecclesiastes:

²⁴ There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; ²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

This says that if we do please God, if we live a life dedicated to our faith, God will reward us with wisdom, knowledge, and joy. However, if we turn our back on God, we will ultimately pay for our sins. Yes, we should enjoy this life, including whatever we do for work. God does indeed give life to us just as it is. The point is that we shouldn't be so busy trying to uncover the mysteries of life on our own. Live for God. Live for wisdom, knowledge, and joy – but seek it from God.

In fact, *Qoheleth*, our author, tells us, maybe the conventional wisdom held by the Chosen People, that humans are somehow more advanced than animals, and therefore more valuable in God's eyes, is itself “vapor”, “smoke”, “mist”:

¹⁸ I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. ¹⁹ For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. ²⁰ All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. ²¹ Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?

Perhaps we are just animals, too. After all, we meet the same fate: death. Are we so sure that when we die God treats us any better than sheep and goats? Why does the author say this? To bring our spirits down into the mud? No, he says this so that we remember to keep a handle on our human pride.

In the middle of Ecclesiastes, in Chapter 4, the author turns to the topic of social justice. It differs very much from the lessons that we get in the Book of Proverbs, where multiple passages vehemently tell us that God will protect the poor and the oppressed, and that the oppressors will eventually be punished:

4 Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. ² And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; ³ but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

Why does the author, whom we are supposed to believe is the king and sage himself, Solomon, say that people who are dead, or better yet, people who never existed are better off than the poor? He is underscoring that there is not necessarily justice from humanity – that is, “*under the sun*”, in our world. The author is saying that humanity is indeed corrupt. He is not saying that God doesn’t care or won’t deal with evil. He is being realistic about our society.

In the 9th of 12 Chapters, the teacher, the preacher, the speaker tells us about a poor, but wise man who reacts to a siege from a powerful enemy king:

¹³ I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. ¹⁴ There was a little city with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. ¹⁵ Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶ So I said, "Wisdom is better than might; yet the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded."

¹⁷ The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one bungler destroys much good.

He is telling us a story "under the sun", that involves humans in our world. There is a city, a small one. Some great king decides to lay siege to it. The people have a choice between capitulation or death. A poor man, who will not in this life be remembered, opens the city up to the invaders. His wisdom is greater than the weapons of the king. Too bad that in the future, people will not remember this lesson. The apparent reason: people will remember the proud success of the evil king and not the prudence of a man who knows that gain gotten by evil is not worth it. It's better to live in peace so that we can enjoy whatever God gives us. The powerful king is losing more than the citizens of the city he conquers.

Here are the final words of Ecclesiastes:

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Qoheleth tells us that the ultimate, and in fact the only profound purpose in life is to live by the laws of God. There will be a final judgement for all. Nothing in this life comes close to the meaning that we find in God.

The Book of Ecclesiastes gives us the perspective of an earthy wise man who has learned that much of what he has striven for is “*vapor*”, “*smoke*”, “*mist*”. The author repeats “*under the sun*” 27 times, and it competes with “*hă-bêl*” in its importance to the text of the book. Why does “*hă-bêl*” often get translated as “*vanity*”, instead of “*vapor*”, “*smoke*”, or “*mist*”? This translation reinforces the contrast that the author is drawing between life “*under the sun*” with life in God’s Kingdom. On this planet, our temporary home, we are part of a mundane cycle of corruption and frustration. It’s fine, and in fact, it is God’s will that we enjoy this life, including whatever we do to earn a living. We just need to keep control of our egos, our pride. Those are the things that corrupt our world “*under the sun*”.

What struck me when I was studying Epicureanism as a Christian kid new to college is that Ecclesiastes, despite its apparent cynicism, is very much centered around God. The ability that we have to enjoy life is due entirely to God. Our goal is contentment, not pleasure, as Epicurus taught. We cannot eliminate the “*hă-bêl*” of life, of the tendency to be disappointed by our earthy endeavors. Epicureanism teaches us to have no fear of death or of any sort of divine

punishment. But *Qoheleth* tells us to fear one thing – and that is God. Old Testament fear of God is a reverence for God, an awe, a submission to the will of God. Epicureanism tells us to seek tranquility through pleasure “*under the sun*”. Ecclesiastes tells us to seek tranquility through God.

I remember reading an enormous number of books about Greek history, literature, and philosophy during my freshman year at Occidental. It struck me at the time that when humans try to find a way in life without God, we tend to rely on an inherently limited, faulty, and corrupt tool: our own reasoning. When we search out an avenue in life that is dependent upon God, we’re looking beyond our limitations at greater truths. That is when God gives us the knowledge and the wisdom that leads to true joy. Stoicism tells us to get the most out of our existence by living for today and relying only on ourselves. *Qoheleth* tells us to get the most out of our existence by living for today – but always relying on God.

One day in class during that freshman year sequence, a student who happened to be a Christian turned out to both have more nerve than me and to be better versed in Scripture than me. She spoke out and said that since Christian thought during the 4th century made vast inroads into Greek culture, and in fact, began to dominate over traditional Greek philosophy, had he, the professor ever considered talking about Judeo-Christian beliefs in his class? Christian thought is

in many ways, a critically important advancement over something like Epicureanism, she said. He did not politely say that Christian thought was out of the scope of his class. Rather, he dismissed faith as ignorant and lacking the intellectual depth of true classical Greek thought. But here is what's true. The Gospel of John begins with "**1** *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" The author of the Gospel is using a Greek word, *Logos*, meaning "Word", quite deliberately because the people reading his Gospel were familiar with Greek culture and knew that Greek philosophers used the word *Logos* to refer to some unknown, mysterious and divine structural order of the universe. In many ways, much of what we read in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels, in the Book of Acts, and in the letters of Paul is deliberately aimed at convincing a population educated in Greek thought that the next logical step in human thought can be attained by discovering the truth of the existence of God. Only then can we get a full picture of what it means to be thoughtful humans.

My message today is that Ecclesiastes, an ancient Hebrew text, is an important steppingstone between those two worlds, between the "*vapor*", "*smoke*", and "*mist*" of life "*under the sun*" and the true insights of life under God. Epicurus tried to convince us that our highest priority should be what we can

possess in this life, what gives us pleasure. He did indeed argue that the fight for fame or wealth is more likely to lead to anxiety than happiness, and so simple happiness is a far better goal. He even argued that generosity helps us foster useful supportive friendships. Our pseudo-Solomon, our author *Qoheleth*, speaks from the perspective of Solomon because while *Qoheleth* lived in the age of Greek thought, *Qoheleth* knew that the ancient Hebrew Sages were in truth far wiser. Rather than having the limited, ultimately unsatisfying perspective of Epicurus, he knew that human aspirations should be focused on God, on the Kingdom of God, that we live not just “*under the sun*”, but under God. We are hardwired to know this. Jesus came along and focused us on an important aspect of this. God built us to understand that self-centered accomplishments leave us empty. However, living in a truly altruistic way, of being generous, forgiving, and empathetic simply because it is right - that is true source of joy that God wants us to discover.