

WISDOM: TO THE LIMITS

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Ecclesiastes 1:1-14; 12:9-14

1 The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

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?

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

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

6 The wind blows to the south, and goes round to the north; round and round 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 continue to flow.

8 All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

9 What has been is what will be,

and what has been done is what will be done;

there is nothing new under the sun.

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

It has already been, in the ages before us.

11 The people of long ago are not remembered,

nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

12 I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, 13 applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. 14 I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

12 9 Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying, and arranging many proverbs. 10 The Teacher sought to find pleasing words, and he wrote words of truth plainly.

11 The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd. 12 Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his

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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.

REFLECT & DISCUSS

1. Read the passage slowly. Then take a deep breath and read it again. What word, phrase, or image stands out to you?
2. The Wisdom Tradition in the bible includes tension. There is the seeming optimism of Proverbs, which suggests pursuing wisdom will lead to a good and rewarding life. Then there is the seemingly more pessimistic Ecclesiastes. It suggests that a meaningful life is far from guaranteed: evil people receive riches, tragedy strikes the virtuous, and death eventually comes for all of us. How might it be a helpful or good thing to have both these accounts held together in scripture?
3. “*Hevel*” is the Hebrew word translated as “vanity” “vapor” or “smoke”. Living for things like wealth, health, prestige, and even wisdom, is like trying to “catch smoke.” It seems like they are right there to be had, but then grasping for them leaves us empty-handed. Do you have any experience with pursuits that have ultimately left you surprisingly empty, unsatisfied, or incomplete?
4. In Chapter 12, we read that the wisdom contained in Ecclesiastes is a kind of goad: something to jar us

into thinking more deeply and living more honestly. Are there people or experiences in your life that have this effect on you?

5. The message of Ecclesiastes seems to include “making peace” with a life that is ultimately outside of our control. As Christians, how do we go about accepting this hard truth? What experiences do you have with “making peace” with a situation, person, or hope that is outside your full or final control? How might faith and God fit into this?
6. Read Ecclesiastes 11:7-10. *Hevel* (vanity) might also stretch to mean “puzzle” or “mystery”... “all is *mystery*.” Ecclesiastes invites us to experience the meaningfulness, joy, and beauty of life, but without thinking we are ultimately in control of it. The puzzle is only unlocked when we give up our sense of mastery over our lives and any expectation that it will just all go like we want no matter what; only then do we (mysteriously!) discover how enduringly amazing, beautiful, and meaningful it truly is. What do you make of this counter-intuitive “wisdom”? Does it resonate with your experience or anything you’ve learned?