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Theme passage

Please read Ecclesiastes 1:1-3

The first three verses of the book define the basic problem that the Preacher wants to explore and attempt to solve. The core of the problem is centred in the word ‘*vanity*’. In verse 2 alone the Preacher uses that word five times. It is important that we as his audience fully understand what he means by this term. In Hebrew, it is the word *hebel*. This word actually does not carry as its main idea the sense of futility and pessimism as translated in numerous modern versions of Scripture, such as the NIV that renders it as ‘meaningless’. The term *hebel* bears the primary idea of something that is fleeting and transitory. For example, the name of Adam and Eve’s second son was Abel; his name is a derivative of the word *hebel*. Abel’s name was based on his life that was quickly taken away; it was a fleeting thing.

In the Old Testament, *hebel* is one of the main words for wind

and breath. These are things that have little substance and are short-lived. In addition, *hebel* is a common designation for idols in the Old Testament. For example, the prophet Jeremiah says,

Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people
 from the length and breadth of the land:
 'Is the LORD not in Zion?
 Is her King not in her?
 Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images,
 and with their foreign *vanities* (pl. of *hebel*)? (Jeremiah 8:19)

The idea here is that idols are lacking in substance and they vanish quickly, especially in contrast to the God of Israel!

The Preacher is claiming that 'all' things on earth are short-lived, transitory, and lacking in lasting substance. He is not hesitant in announcing this tenet. He uses the common Hebrew means of the superlative: 'vanity of vanities'; for example, the most holy place in the temple is called the 'holy of holies'. And, indeed, is this not how many people feel about their existence? Do they not believe that nothing stays the same? I remember my father advising me to enjoy my children while they were young because 'you turn around twice and they will be gone'. Is it not true that the older one gets the faster time seems to be passing by? Everything appears to be in constant change; everything is *hebel*.

This is a common thought throughout history. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus taught that the basic and fundamental reality is *change*. All things are in the process of becoming something else. The only abiding reality is the process itself: this is the Law of Change. Thus, for example, if a person steps into a river, gets out and steps back in, it is not the same river; the

river has changed. Consequently, to Heraclitus nothing 'is', but everything is in the state of 'becoming'.

We must remember that Solomon's statement in this theme sentence of 1:2 is the cry of those people who are attempting to live and find meaning in reality apart from God. To them, life passes quickly and it is a vapour. Their flesh is like grass that is soon devoured. What then is the meaning of life?

In 1:3, Solomon takes it a step further by asking, what gain is there in a man's work when everything is simply passing away so quickly? The Hebrew word the Preacher employs here for 'gain' is an economic term that means 'profit/increase'. What true profit is there for a man who labours diligently all his life but is speedily overtaken by time and circumstance? This is ironic: one works for 'profit', but what true and long-lasting profit is there in one's work?

How many people do we know who pour out their lives into their work, and that is all there is to their lives? They attempt to find meaning and significance through work; it is what defines them as humans. I once had an African student who said to me that he was puzzled by how Americans greet each other when they first meet. The opening question Americans often ask of each other is, 'What do you do for a living?' I then asked him what his countrymen say to one another at a first meeting. His answer was startling: 'Are you a Christian?'

Solomon is telling us that to attempt to find meaning and significance in work alone is *hebel*. It is a fleeting thing and has no real substance on its own. People who do this die, and what have they gained? In Mark 8:36, Jesus gets at the heart of this

issue when he asks, 'For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?'