

Finding Significance in the “Hevel” of Life

Introduction to the Book of Ecclesiastes

Pastor Dan Arcilla, March 24, 2024, PM Service Series “Vapor”, Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Text: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 | **Subject:** Navigating life | **Theme:** Hevel

Proposition: While life under the sun is like a vapor, we are to enjoy life as a gift from God, looking to Christ for ultimate significance.

I. Introduction

II. Understand the main purpose of Ecclesiastes (1:1)

A. **Context:** OT wisdom literature helps us navigate a “messy” world.

B. **Author:** A man on a mission – King Solomon’s quest.

C. **Content:** Trying to understand life - “what’s the point?”

III. Understand the main thesis of Ecclesiastes (1:2)

A. **The thesis:** “Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” (1:2)

B. **The definition of hevel.**

Interpreting Ecclesiastes properly pivots on one word: **Hevel**. It appears **38 times** in the book,¹ so how we translate it drastically affects understanding its overall message. In Hebrew it is spelled “**HBL**” but pronounced as “**hevel**.” It literally means “**vapor, breath, or smoke**.”



C. **The usage of Hevel in the Bible.**

1. IT MAINLY IMPLIES TRANSIENCE.

- **Genesis 4 - Abel**
- **Job 7:16** - “I waste away; I will not live forever. Leave me alone, for my days are but a (hevel) breath.”
- **Psalms 39:5-6** “Behold, You have made my days as handbreadths, And my lifetime as nothing in Your sight; Surely every man at his best is a mere (hevel) breath.”
- **Proverb 21:6** “The acquisition of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting (hevel) vapor...”
- **New Testament** – In James 4:14, 3 of 4 Septuagint translations use Greek word for “vapor.”

2. IT CAN ALSO IMPLY A LACK OF SIGNIFICANCE, GLORY, SUBSTANCE.

- **Psalms 62:9** “Men of low degree are only (hevel) vanity and men of rank are a lie; In the balances they go up; They are together lighter than (hevel) breath.”
- **Prov 31:30** “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is (hevel) vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.”

¹ Hevel appears multiple times in Ecclesiastes 1:2; 1:14; 2:1; 2:14; 2:15; 5:6; 6:4; 6:11; 6:12; 7:15; 9:9; and 12:8.

- **Idols.** Hevel is often translated as “idol” in many verses in the OT.
- **Psa 31:6** “I hate those who regard (hevel) vain idols, But I trust in the LORD.”

D. The nuances of hevel.

Our modern translations of hevel drop the metaphorical nature of the word, and translate as

- **Vanity** (KJV, NKJV, NASB 95 & 97, LSB, RSV, ASV, AMP)
- **Futile** (NASB, ESV, HCSB, CSB, NET)
- **Meaningless** (NIV, NLT)
- **Pointless** (ISV, GWT)
- **Useless** (GNT)

With hevel, perhaps it is best not to think of a 1-to-1 English equivalent, but embrace the metaphor. Like vapor, breath, or smoke, there are many qualities inherent to the image:

- **Evanescient** – transient, fading out of sight, memory, existence.
- **Elusive** – looks easy to grasp, but slips through your fingers; Frustrating.
- **Ever-changing** – takes one shape then another.
- **Enigmatic** – puzzling, vexing, mysterious.

IV. Understand the main question of Ecclesiastes (1:3-11)

A. The Main Question: What’s the Point? (1:3)

“What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?” (1:3)

B. The Main Reasons for the Question (1:4-11)

1. **NO ONE LIVES FOREVER (1:4-7).**
2. **NOTHING SATISFIES (1:8).**
3. **NOTHING IS NEW (1:9-10).**
4. **NOTHING IS REMEMBERED. (1:11).**

C. What’s the answer? Stay tuned!

V. Applications