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# Ecclesiastes

by Kurtis Peters

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Vanity of vanities! Reading Ecclesiastes is meaningless! Here is a book in which the cynic can rest. Ecclesiastes (also called Qoheleth) consists of reflections on life and the world through a none-too-positive lens. Depending on your translation, the opening of the book suggests that all is vanity or that all is meaningless. Neither of these translations is great, though vanity is a bit better. The Hebrew word refers to breath or vapour, something that quickly comes and quickly goes, something that may appear and then dissipate into nothing, though it constitutes our very existence. It's not as if everything were meaningless, but rather that everything is fleeting, or maybe futile. In that way, it may imply that everything is vanity (not in the sense of self-flattery, but that it is *in vain*). But even this is a stretch. The book of Ecclesiastes repeatedly reflects on the fact that the world does not change. There is nothing new under the sun. There is nothing to be gained from one's labour. It's best simply to eat, drink, and be merry. That is, one should pursue enjoyment and pleasure in life. The whole book is written from the perspective of an elder who longs for the days of youth. The slow decay of old age is a recurrent theme and is the main image in the concluding reflections of 12:1-8, though this is easily missed because it is all through the use of metaphors (grinders are teeth, windows are eyes, almond blossoms are white hair, etc.).

In all this cynicism are several important lessons. One of these is simply that there is a place for cynical reflections on life. Faith need not be naive or simplistic. Those who are faithful

need not always feel thankful for all things. Honesty in grief or dissatisfaction is not dismissed. A second important lesson follows on the heels of the first, however. Cynicism may be a starting place, but it is not the goal. The very end of the book, apparently written by a later editor, reflects on the truth of the book and yet concludes with an encouragement to fear God and keep God's commandments, for God will judge all things. Now, this sounds rather ominous. In part, it was meant to sound ominous, especially to those who pursued a life apart from God's commandments. But this is likely not referring so much to the specific details of every law from Leviticus, for example, but more to the way of life to which the biblical commandments point—a life of right relationships with God, people, and creation. Those who pursue selfish gain ought to beware.

And so this editor puts two things before the readers, both affirming the book's recommendation to enjoy what pleasure life has to offer, even if (or perhaps because) much of life is fleeting, and offering reassurance that God cares about how people behave, thereby giving purpose to human actions. ✨