

Lesson #17 – Ecclesiastes 2019

Before starting this lesson, read at least **Ecclesiastes 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 11, 12**. If possible read the whole book. You may find it helpful to read just the minimum chapters, go thru the lesson and then read the whole book. You will discover what works best for you.

As translated in our Bibles, Ecclesiastes is one of the most negative books you could find. It leaves most people depressed. However the problem is not with Solomon. The problem is our translations.

For example, thirty seven times Solomon uses the Hebrew word **hebel**. It means **breath or vapor** - the wisp of breath that you see when you breathe on a cold morning. Solomon says that wisp of breath is a picture of **life**. In other words, he is using picture language.

The **western** mind says the purpose of picture language is to illustrate **facts - the obvious**.

Factually, a wisp of breath is empty; it is nothingness.

So the western mind says, *if that is a picture of life, it means life is empty and without meaning*.

The **eastern** mind says the purpose of picture language is to show what is **hidden**; what is easy to miss.

Figuratively, a wisp of breath is beautiful, but is also brief, elusive and unexplainable.

The eastern mind says **this** is a picture of life - beautiful, but brief, elusive and unexplainable.

Notice that **culture determines the interpretation of picture language**. People from the Middle East look at picture language and interpret it one way. People from the West look at the same Jewish words or pictures and interpret them in another way. Our Bible translators are Gentiles from the West.

Instead of just **translating** the Hebrew word, ***all of life is like a wisp of breath***, our Bibles have a **Western interpretation**. It says, ***all of life is empty, meaningless, futile or useless***. The rest of the book is then translated to fit that point of view. Obviously it creates a book that is depressing and negative.

But let's step back and think logically. *Ecclesiastes* is one of the Jewish **wisdom** books.

The purpose of wisdom literature was to give wisdom or skill in some area of life. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Solomon wrote this book to give **wisdom about life** – how to enjoy **life** within its limitations.

Thruout the book, Solomon says, *enjoy life; it is a gift from God*.

Tragically, our English Bibles have lost Solomon's meaning and purpose. Instead of being one of the most helpful books, it is the most misunderstood.

It leaves the reader confused by first saying *life is meaningless*

and then saying, *enjoy life, it is a gift from God*.

That is a contradiction. God would never give us a gift that is meaningless.

Yet that is what our Bibles say. This means something is wrong with our translations.

So let's take the words Solomon uses, put it with Middle Eastern thinking and see if we can find the beauty and meaning that he intended.

The Hebrew name for this book was Kohéleth. *Ecclesiastes* is the Greek name. Both words mean *a teacher calling people together in order to teach them*. Solomon is the teacher. Jewish tradition says he is writing in the last year of his life, at the age of 60. The date is 930 BC. If this book were published today, it would be called, *Discoveries of Life: by Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived*.

When Solomon became king, he asked God for wisdom.

God gave him both **human** wisdom and **godly** wisdom.

When he was 40, Solomon wrote **Proverbs** to show the value of **godly** wisdom and how to use it.

Twenty years later he writes **Ecclesiastes**, to show the value of **human** wisdom. He uses it to teach about life and **how** to enjoy it.

Since he is writing from the Jewish culture and thinking of 3000 years ago, we need to know the meaning of **words** in his day.

Solomon uses a Hebrew word 8 times that our Bibles translate **burden**.

This implies it is something we want to get rid of - something bad.

But in his culture it means *a task that requires effort*. It is something positive and good; something challenging.

Another Hebrew word is used 31 times. Our Bibles translate it as **evil, heavy** or **grievous**.

But Solomon means *frustration* or *sorrow*. Notice how much it changes the meaning.

The word *wisdom* in **this** book means **human wisdom** : the ability to use gifts and talents, to use common sense and understand the world around us.

According to Solomon, human wisdom is a gift from God.

It is to be developed thru what we see and observe and by what we can prove thru science, logic or reason.

But human wisdom has limitations. It cannot understand the spiritual.

It cannot understand the things of God, such as His greatness or life after death.

In this book, *wisdom* always means *human* wisdom. There are 2 exceptions. In chapter 12:9, 11, it means *godly* wisdom.

In summary

Burden means *a task that requires thinking*.

Evil, heavy or **grievous** means *frustration* or *sorrow*.

Wisdom means *human wisdom*.

There are also 3 important **phrases**.

Solomon uses the phrase **under the sun** 29 times or **under heaven** 3 times.

He uses these pictures to mean *our life here on earth*. Being an agricultural society, most of their life was spent outside and working in the sun.

Seven times he uses the phrase **chasing or longing after the wind**. How picturesque!

No matter how much a person chases the wind, they will never be able to catch it.

So it is with life on this earth. We can never say, *I have captured life - it is mine to keep*.

As we mentioned earlier, Solomon uses the Hebrew word **hebel**, 37 times.

Our Bibles translate it: **vanity, meaningless, useless, empty, or futile**.

Unfortunately, none of these words are accurate.

Literally, the Hebrew means **breath or vapor; the wisp of breath on a cold morning**.

Solomon uses this picture as the basis of his book.

According to the title, *Ecclesiastes*, Solomon is calling people together to teach them. To get them interested, he says, *I have found the most perfect illustration of life with all its activities. Life is like a one's breath on a cold morning. It has beauty, but it is also brief, elusive and unexplainable*.

Interestingly, the idea of breath or vapor being elusive entered our computer world years ago – the word *vaporware*. It referred to merchandise that was talked about and advertised. But when you tried to get it, it was not there. Solomon is saying happiness and fulfillment in life is like *vaporware*. It is talked about and advertised, but when you try to get it, so often it is not there. If you do find it, it does not last or satisfy long-term.

Life has beauty, but it is also brief, elusive and unexplainable.

Solomon then develops these ideas in the **OUTLINE**

His Studies	1:1 - 2:16
His Observations	2:17 - 12:8
And His Conclusions	12:9-14

Because our Bibles have lost so much of the original meaning, I am going to use the expanded paraphrase that I wrote.

It uses Solomon's picture language with the Jewish meaning of his day.

It also includes the things Solomon was saying in-between-the-lines that we so easily miss.

His **studies** about life are from chapter 1:1 - 2:16.

He starts with **NATURE**.

1:5 *The sun rises and sets and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, always returning to do it again. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never filled up. The water in the streams just keeps coming.*

The sun, wind and water are there, but then they are gone, only to come back again. Nature has brief and endless cycles. It is a picture of life here on this earth. We go to work, clean house, fix meals, pay bills, wash the car, only to do it over and over and over again.

From nature, Solomon learns our lives are filled with brief and endless cycles - nothing is permanent.

A second way Solomon studies life is thru **EXPERIENCE**.

Verse 13 of my paraphrase. *God has given us a desire to **understand** life, but it is a task that brings frustration, because so much of life **cannot** be understood.*

According to this verse, Solomon discovered life has more questions than answers. Why is there so much unfairness in life? What such uncertainty in life. Many times there *are* no answers. This brings frustration and sorrow.

Solomon is studying life thru experience, so he tells us all the things he tried. He wants us to know his study was really extensive.

According to 2:1 he tries **pleasure**

Verse 3 *Then I tried **wine**, not to get drunk or lose control. I wanted to enjoy it for the feeling and cheer it produces. I also wondered if I could find more worth to life if I did not take things so seriously - if I learned to relax a little more.*

Verse 4 *I tried great **projects**. I built houses and planted vineyards just for me. I made gardens and parks with all kinds of fruit trees just for me. I made pools to water them just for me. I bought male and female **slaves**, besides the ones who were born in my house. I had **herds** of cattle and many flocks - more than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I also gathered **silver** and **gold** just for me, along with other treasures that kings have and that come from far away places. Just for me I acquired men and women **singers**. And I had the pleasures of **love** from my harem.*

In these verses we find Solomon trying projects and goals, the beauty of nature, ranching, hired help, wealth, music and sex. The Hebrew emphasizes he did it just for himself. He was testing and studying what would give **him** enjoyment in life.

He sums this up by saying in verse 10 *If I saw something I thought would give me pleasure, I got it. When I thought a project would give me satisfaction, I developed it. And I found satisfaction in all my efforts.*

Notice, Solomon does not think life is empty or meaningless. He is not miserable. He says he enjoyed his projects to the fullest. There **was** satisfaction.

But at the same time he makes another discovery. Verse 11

Yet when I fixed my attention on all my projects and what I worked so hard to achieve, look what I discovered. The enjoyment was brief and elusive just like a wisp of breath; it was like chasing the wind. I could not capture the satisfaction and hold onto it.

Solomon is saying enjoyment was there; the problem was, it did not last.

Solomon has studied life from nature and experience.

A third way he now studies life is thru **REASONING**.

Perhaps thru deep thinking and logic he can find answers to life.

In 2:12-16, he talks about wisdom and folly.

He is talking about a person who thinks deeply in contrast with someone who takes life as it comes.

A deep thinker versus a carefree person.

He knows in theory, that one who spends time thinking profoundly is to be admired. But when people come to the end of their life, deep thinkers and easy-going people die in the same way. That raises the question, *does all that wisdom make any difference?* It makes Solomon aware that everything is temporary, even good things and things of value.

Solomon studies life from nature, experience and reasoning.

These studies now lead to his **observations** about life.

Using the Jewish style of writing, he begins with a summary statement in chapter 2:17.

Our Bibles read, *So I hated life...* I can assure you, that is **not** what Solomon means.

People in the Middle East use extreme words for non-extreme meanings. For the Jews, many times the word *hate* means *to not prefer or choose* something. Solomon uses the word *hate* in this verse to mean *not like as much; not as wonderful*. He says in 2:17,

Life is not as wonderful as I thought it would be. I enjoyed myself in lots of activities and projects, but the enjoyment did not last. Just when I thought I had a handle on life, it eluded me.

This is his summary.

He then begins a series of individual observations.

In the rest of chapter 2, he notices that sometimes we put so much of ourselves into our work, we become obsessed with it. But as we get older and realize someone else is going to get the final results, we no longer love our work to the same degree. It no longer controls our life with the same intensity.

In chapter 3 Solomon makes a 2nd observation.

There is a time for everything so we should enjoy each day to the fullest. However, to keep things in balance, he wants us to know life is mixed with good and bad. We should thoroughly enjoy the good things, but not be surprised when there are heartaches, problems and troubles. There will always be both: joy and sorrow, blessing and trial.

So to keep balanced, we need to know 4 things

That life is a mixture of good and bad.

God's plan for us is not just this life but also eternity.

Life is unfair, but God will eventually bring justice.

Life on this earth is temporary because we are mortal.

To explain our mortality, he uses examples from what he has observed. Our Bibles make it sound like we are no different than animals. That is not what Solomon is saying. He is talking about life from the **human** perspective. Starting with 3:19 he says,

*This life is brief and like the animals, our bodies will physically die. In spite of all we do, when death comes, there is no more breathing. **Breath** that gives life – meaning our spirit - leaves the body. The body is put in the ground. All come from dust and to dust all return.*

*Since we cannot **see** that breath or spirit, **human** wisdom cannot say with certainty if there is a difference between the breath of animals and the breath of humans. **Human** wisdom cannot say with certainty if human and animal breath go to the same place or different places.*

***Human** wisdom cannot speak with certainty about life **after** death. It can only tell us about life **before** death. Life is brief and uncertain. Therefore do not be afraid to enjoy life while you have it. Enjoy to the fullest, each day for the good things that it brings.*

Solomon has explained that based on what we can see, it is impossible for **human** wisdom to prove what happens with the spirit at the time of death. However, at the end of the book, Solomon will use **godly** wisdom to explain about the spirit. With **godly** wisdom he **can** speak with certainty.

In chapters 2 and 3 Solomon has made 2 basic **observations**:

First, as you get older and wiser, work will not control your life with the same intensity.

Secondly, there is a time for everything. So enjoy each day for the good things and do not be surprised when there are problems and sorrow.

His third **observation** - chapter 4

Enjoyment of life never lasts. There is always something that ruins it. It may be injustice, people with wrong motives, lack of family and friends to share things with or leaders who let us down. Any or all of these can keep us from enjoying life.

A 4th **observation** - chapter 5

Playing games with God to get yourself out of trouble will get you into trouble.

He then gives examples of people trying to manipulate God with lots of sacrifices, prayers or big promises.
God, if You do this for me, I promise to do this, that or the other. He warns, *if you make a promise to God and do not keep it, it is disobedience and there will be consequences. So never make a promise to God that realistically you cannot keep.*

Another **observation** from the end of chapter 5 and all of chapter 6.

Wealth does **not** guarantee enjoyment of life. Solomon then gives 4 reasons.

Wealth can corrupt government so that leaders ignore the needs of the people.

Wealth never satisfies long-term.

Wealth can lead to frustration and sorrow when people try to hoard it

or they lose it and have nothing left for their children.

Wealth can bring forgetfulness of God. Wealth does **not** guarantee enjoyment of life.

A sixth **observation**.

We learn more from times of difficulty than from times of happiness. But never take this to an extreme.

On one hand, we should not deny ourselves everything that we enjoy.

But neither should we let ourselves have and do everything we want. We need to learn balance - when to say *yes* to ourselves and when to say *no*. 7:16-18.

In these 6 observations from chapters 2-7, Solomon is pointing out that **life** and fulfillment is **BRIEF** and **ELUSIVE**.

Before going to the next observation, I want to explain Solomon's comments about **women** in chapter 7:26-29. Our Bibles have Solomon saying,

I find more bitter than death, the woman who is a snare; whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who please God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare...while I was searching, but not finding, I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. This only I have found. God made humanity upright...

This sound like Solomon is a male-chauvinist or is against women, so let me put it in context. Solomon is speaking about his personal life and experience. Remember, it was his pagan wives that brought about his downfall. The paraphrase brings out what Solomon is saying in-between the lines.

*By my own sad experience I discovered there is something worse than death. It is a woman who snares a man away from God. Her heart is a trap and her hands are chains. The man who lives within God's rules will escape her, but the one who disobeys, will be ensnared by her. In the midst of searching, while I did not find all my answers, I discovered a truth about humanity. **Men** who are wise by choosing to live within God's rules are very rare – "One in a million". When I looked among all my foreign, pagan **wives** that I took, I did not find any with **godly** wisdom. One thing I know for sure. This is not the fault of God. When He created Adam and Eve, they were perfect. But they and all humanity who descended from them decided they wanted to go their own ways and try their own ideas. This is also the reason for **my** failures.*

Notice, Solomon is **not** writing against women – he's reflecting on his **own** life and what caused **his** failures.

In chapters 8-11, he continues with **observations** based on the fact that **life is UNEXPLAINABLE**.

There are so many questions that cannot be answered.

There is so much we do not know.

Sixteen times he uses a form of the word *knowledge*.

See if you relate to the unanswerable questions he raises.

Why can wicked people pretend to be good and get away with it? 8:10

Why do good people get what the wicked deserve and the wicked get what good people deserve? 8:14

Why do good people and bad people both come to the end of their life and die in the same way?

*From a **human** perspective it does not seem to matter how one lives. But that is not true. 9:2*

So how can you explain it?

*Why is it the best people do **not** always come out on top? 9:11*

Why is it that wise people who have answers are never asked?

If they are asked and their answers used, why is it they are never appreciated or receive the credit? 9:16

Why do incompetent people get to be leaders and qualified people are rejected? 10:6

Why is life so unfair? 10:8-9

Life is **unexplainable**.

Life is also **UNCERTAIN**.

Solomon says: *We never know when disaster may come. 11:1-2*

We can never be sure what will succeed and what will fail in our life. 11:6

The uncertainty of life!

In his final **observations**, Solomon goes back to his main focus – life is **BRIEF**.

He tells adults, *We will have times of pleasure, so do not be afraid to enjoy life. But there will also be times of darkness.*

He tells young people, *Enjoy your strength and youth while you have them.*

*Respond to **God** while you have strength and youth so you can use the best of your life and energy for Him.*

He reminds everyone, *Life is short and the body deteriorates.*

In the final chapter, Solomon uses illustrations from nature and life to emphasize that life is short and the body deteriorates. But he does it in a way that is so foreign to our thinking, most of us completely miss what he is saying. By using the expanded paraphrase, we will have both the picture Solomon creates as well as the meaning of the picture from that culture.

Starting with chapter 12:1

We should make the most of life when we are young and strong.

We need to remember our Creator in our youth when we are making choices about life.

We need to accept the changes that come with age.

The days of sadness will come and the years when we cannot do what we did before ...

...when we will say, life has changed; it no longer gives me the same pleasure.

Later on in life, the sun, along with the light of the moon and stars, will grow dark;

*The **clouds** will return after the rain.*

Notice this picture – **clouds** after the rain. Here is the expanded explanation.

*As darkness and clouds take away light, so grief and pain take away our enjoyment of life. When we are young we go thru difficult times, but we expect things to get better just as we expect the **sun** to come after the rain. But when we get older, instead of sun, we find clouds returning after the rain; we find depression and sadness after our tears. We know that sometimes and in some situations, things **will** never get better in this life.*

Verse 3

To be more specific, the keepers of the house - the hands and arms will tremble.

Even those who had strong backs and legs will be bent over.

It will be hard to chew when there are less molars or grinding teeth.

As we look out the windows of our eyes, things will be dimmer because of cataracts.

Verse 4

The doors to the street will be closed and the sound of grinding will fade .

In this verse Solomon is using a picture that would only make sense to his culture, so again I have added the explanation.

The sounds of the market-place include the grinding of grain. It is a sound that gives comfort because it means life is going on as usual. But as we get older, we will not go out as much to hear and enjoy the sounds of everyday life.

Continuing with the last part of verse 4.

We will get up with the birds because we cannot sleep.

But we will not enjoy the songs of the birds because we cannot hear.

Verse 5

We will be afraid of heights and dread having to climb steep hills or the stairs.

We will be afraid of traffic in the streets.

Our hair will be like almond blossoms which gradually turn white.

Our body will be like that of the grasshoppers. When it is cold, they have to sit in the sun and get warmed before they can move.

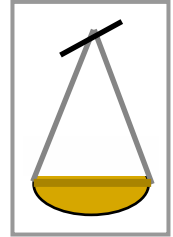
Our desires will change.

We will lose our desire for certain kinds of food.

Mental and physical challenges will not be as exciting. Sexual desire may diminish.

All of this takes place because we are going to our eternal home.

When it happens, those who know us will mourn our death.



Because we are going to die, Solomon takes 3 pictures from his culture to instruct those who are getting older.

Verse 6

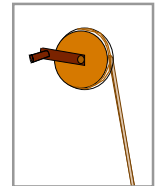
*Respond to God **before** the silver cord is severed or the golden bowl is broken.*

In this phrase, Solomon is thinking of a wooden bowl that was overlaid with gold and made into an oil lamp. It hung from the ceiling, held up by a silver cord or chain. If the chain broke, the golden bowl-lamp fell to the marble floor, was ruined and the light went out. So our lives which are valuable like silver or gold can experience catastrophe and life is ended. The earthly light goes out.

Solomon continues in verse 6. *Respond to God **before** the pitcher is shattered at the well*



Pitchers in those days, were made of clay and therefore very fragile. Just a small blow against the stone wall of the well could shatter it. So our bodies, made of clay, are fragile. Often it is only a small incident that brings our life to an end – our life is shattered.



The last phrase of verse 6 is Solomon's third picture. *Respond to God **before** the wheel is broken at the well.*

People who had extra deep wells used a pulley-wheel to lower a bucket and bring the water up. But if the pulley broke, there was no more water. So when our physical system breaks down, there is no more life.

All 3 pictures point out that life with beauty and value is so fragile. Disaster can strike quickly and unexpectedly.

Solomon continues in verse 7,

When this happens, death, as a member of God's family, our body made of dust will return to the ground. Our spirit will return to God because He is the One who gave it.

At this point Solomon is speaking with godly as well as human wisdom so he can speak with **certainty** to those in God's family. At death, our body connects with the ground but our soul and spirit connect with God.

Using the circular style of Jewish writing, Solomon ends the book as he began.

He says in verse 8,

Life with all its activities is like the **breath** you see on a cold morning: it has beauty, but it also is **BRIEF, ELUSIVE and UNEXPLAINABLE.**

Solomon had been a godly king for over 20 years. But in his mid to late 40's he turned from God to worship the idols of his pagan wives. Now in the last year of his life, at the age of 60, he repents. So his conclusion about life is not only from his studies and observations, but also from his own personal life.

His Conclusions

He says in verse 13 *Here is the final conclusion. God has put us on earth to have purpose as well as enjoyment of life. But this is not possible without God. We need to know what He is like so we live in awe of Him. We need to be afraid of His consequences if we disobey. We need to obey, so we do not lose our godly wisdom.*

*It is only the **spiritual** that can add a lasting quality to our enjoyment, fulfillment and satisfaction in this life.*

Having said this however, Solomon is a realist. He knows that unfairness and injustice in life can easily destroy our enjoyment, fulfillment or satisfaction, so he makes one final statement. He assures us that God has a day when **all** injustice **will** be dealt with.

Solomon's wisdom about life is in the Eastern style and thinking with circular writing, repetition, picture language and many, many words.

We are from the West so let me put everything he said into our Western style – brief and to the point.

Life is **unexplainable**. Why?

So that we stop trying to play God. We do not have all the answers.

Life is **brief**. Why?

So that we enjoy each day to the fullest. So that we make the most of our opportunities.

Life is **elusive** and not completely satisfying. Why?

So that we look forward to eternity.

Earlier in the book, Solomon said that God has put a part of Himself - eternity - within us.* 3:13 We are made for eternity.

This is why things of time – things of earth can never satisfy or fulfill completely.

God wants us to be homesick for living with **Him** in His presence.

* Some Bibles say: *He set the **world** in their heart.* However the Hebrew word is *eternity* or *timelessness* .