

Chasing after the Wind

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Ecclesiastes 1 | March 5, 2017

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I. Introduction to this Study

This week we begin a Lenten series in the book of Ecclesiastes entitled Chasing After the Wind, a common refrain throughout the book describing the futility of running after worldly things.

This week, we're chasing after the wind of wisdom.

II. Connecting with One Another

Can you recall ever being excited to learn something new? What was it?

III. Study the Text

a. Read Ecclesiastes 1.1 (just that first verse!).

How is the author of Ecclesiastes introduced? What three titles is he given in your translation? What do these titles tell us about his identity?

b. The NIV refers to him as "the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem," implying the author of Ecclesiastes was King Solomon himself! Learn more about Solomon's quest for wisdom in 2nd Chronicles 1.7-12, his ability to utilize it in 1st Kings 3.16-28, and the vast sum of his knowledge in 1st Kings 4.29-34. For further examples of such wisdom, read through the Book of Proverbs, also authored by Solomon.

Imagine, for a moment, you don't know anything about the content of Ecclesiastes: What do you think this book will be about, with an author so enamored with the pursuit of wisdom?

c. Read Ecclesiastes 1.2. If you're in a group, read it in as many translations as possible. If you're engaging this study guide alone, click onto biblegateway.com for the same experience.

What do you *feel* when reading this verse? Have you ever felt that way before?

d. The Hebrew word translated as "meaningless" or "vanity" is *hebel*, identical to Cain's younger brother in Genesis 4, denoting vapor or breath – sadly similar to Abel's short life. In addition it connotes something empty and worthless (see Isaiah 49.4 and 57.13 for examples).

William P. Brown writes, "As brother Abel gained God's approval yet gave up his life as the victim of fraternal discontent, so any gain in life, however tangible and secure, can easily 'take wings to itself, flying like an eagle toward heaven' (Proverbs 23.5)."

Does this blunt assertion from Solomon in verse 2 surprise you? If so, why?

Does it seem like this kind of talk belongs in the Bible? Why or why not?

- e. Read Ecclesiastes 1.3-7 (time permitting, cross reference Psalm 19.1-4).

During the time of this book's writing, there was both anxiety and hope for economic betterment, though Judah's middle class was shrinking in a volatile Persian economy.

Brown writes, "The whole world is a scene of incessant movement and activity. But is it purposeful?... For all the constant motion that characterizes the cosmos, one would think that something is being accomplished. But no. Even as the millennia come and go, any semblance of progress is only a mirage. Activity abounds; everything is in perpetual motion, like a hamster on a wheel, but no destination is reached."

Have you ever felt that way? What prompted it? What brought you out of it?

- f. Read Ecclesiastes 1.8-11.

After discussing the weariness of the cosmos, the Teacher engages the human condition, though with many of the same conclusions. In verse 9 we encounter one of the many phrases from Scripture that are used in common, everyday language.

Have you ever said, "There is nothing new under the sun"? What did you mean?

- g. Turn to 2nd Corinthians 5.11-21 and Revelation 21.1-5.

How do these verses answer Solomon's plight?

How are we involved in these verses (see especially 2nd Corinthians 5)?

- h. Read Ecclesiastes 1.12-15.

Zack Eswine writes, "What can a local man know about all that is done in the world? Yet, we know that global savvy can be greatly gained by paying close attention to what most overlook." What's more, as king, Solomon interacted with representatives from around the known world (see 1st Kings 10).

In verse 14, we find the first reference to the title of our series, "a chasing after the wind." How could something so important as wisdom be meaningless?

- i. Read Ecclesiastes 1.16-18 (time permitting, see also 1st Kings 10.7 and 23).

In verse 18, the Teacher authors a proverb that seems contrary to his own advice in the Proverbs (see especially 2 and 3.13-26). It sounds almost like he is affirming that "ignorance is bliss."

Have you ever seen this to be true, that "the more knowledge, the more grief"?

- j. Philip G. Ryken writes, "Here 'wisdom' refers to what people can learn about the world without special revelation from God. This is worthy pursuit, as far as it goes. All truth is God's truth, wherever it may be found... But the question still needs to

be asked: how far will human wisdom take us? Will information bring transformation? Can it lead us to everlasting life?"

Spend some time reflecting on his questions. How would you answer them?

- k. Paul engages similar territory in 1st Corinthians 1.18-31 and Philippians 3.1-11. Time permitting, read them carefully.

Where do you see similarities in Paul and Solomon's thinking?

Where do you see differences?

- l. Ryken concludes, "The pursuit of knowledge *itself* is what turns out to be such a bad business. The longer he looked for answers and the harder he tried to understand the meaning of life, the more frustrated he became with all of life's unanswerable questions and impenetrable enigmas."

Why does Ryken insist "pursuit of knowledge *itself*" is "a bad business"?

Recall what the Apostle Paul writes in 1st Corinthians 1 and Philippians 3. How would Paul respond to King Solomon?

- m. Read James 1.5, then 3.13-18.

How is the wisdom encouraged by James different than the "pursuit of knowledge *itself*"?

IV. Pray

- a. Lift up those you know who are chasing after the wind of wisdom – diligently searching to understand everything about life through reason – instead, asking God to reveal Himself to them in a way they can understand and respond to,
- b. Pray for those with specific questions of faith, that God would equip Christians around them to point them to Jesus Christ, "the wisdom of God,"
- c. Ask God to be with our children and students, as they grow up in a world that minimizes the role of faith and elevates reason alone.