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BEING HUMAN

THE WISDOM OF ECCLESIASTES FOR TODAY

study guide : part two





Being Human?

Power : How **NOT** to be Superheroes

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Being Human | Part Two: Power (How NOT to be Superheroes)

“Pride is essentially competitive...Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are only proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others”

– C.S. Lewis.

“It’s almost like social media creates...an airbrushed life that makes everybody dissatisfied.”

–Renegotiating Faith Report

Fear of Not Being Amazing: The fear of being ordinary, and of the consequences of failing if we try something new.

I. Nothing New Under the Sun. Really?

“...there is nothing new under the sun”

(Eccl 1:9).

The word often translated as “meaningless” throughout Ecclesiastes is the Hebrew word *'hevel'* – and it doesn’t mean “void of any meaning.” It is also translated “vapour”, or “breath” or “smoke” in other places in the Old Testament. And so, as we saw last week, when the Teacher says life is *'hevel'*, like smoke, it means that it is not something we can grasp hold of and control – its meaning often eludes us.

And more, like ‘smoke’ life is fleeting, like vapour, it blows away. More, like vapor, *'hevel'* includes actions that have “no permanent impact or impression on reality” as scholar Ian Provan points out.



II. What does “Nothing New” Mean?

Human life is fleeting, and if you set your heart on *exceptionalism*, of thinking you can master your destiny, that’s an illusion; it’s something that will elude your grasping.

“Exceptionality – that is trying to be the exception to the rule of the cosmos by accomplishing something new, original, and amazing that will win the attention and admiration of others. The Teacher of Ecclesiastes shows us, today, that this pursuit of exceptionalism is, in the end, futile because there is nothing new under the sun.”

– Jacob Harder

“**What do people gain** from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and go, but the earth remains forever.”

– Eccl 1:3-4

“No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.”

– Eccl 1:11

“Yet when **I surveyed all that my hands had done**, and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was

meaningless [or ‘a vapor’] chasing after the wind; **nothing was gained under the sun.**”

– Eccl 2:11

The Teacher is telling us: “Get it all and you still won’t get what your heart ultimately longs for. Think your achievements will ‘be enough’ – enough to satisfy the ache of our hearts – it never will.”

“The complaint of the depressive individual, 'Nothing is possible,' can only occur in a society that thinks, 'Nothing is impossible.'”

– Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*

As a book of wisdom, of *God’s wisdom for us today*, this book breaks our illusions that “nothing is impossible.” And when those illusions are broken, we can be open to truly good news.

III. Good News

Byung-Chul Han, he sees our society as one of achievement, in which we self-exploit ourselves for production. He writes: “The society of laboring and achievement is not a free society”. “... it leads to a society of work in which the master himself has become a laboring slave”; “One exploits oneself.”

The Burnout Society

Rest in what Jesus has already done for us (Matt 11:28-30). Jesus accomplished for us, through his life, death and resurrection, what we couldn't on our own.

IV. Take Home

1. Relax

“Cease striving and know that I am God.”

- Psalm 46:10.

“The universe is not designed to contain gods and heroes, but mortal beings who accept the limitations that have been set upon their lives and get on with them in quietness and humility.”

- Ian Provan

“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: you should mind your own business and work with your hands.”

- 1 Thess 4:11

2. Don't Compare (Drop the Pride)

Ask yourself:

- In what sense am I being tempted to play the comparison-game?
- Am I ready to drop it?
- How would that free me – to just do my work, to actually enjoy it, to serve and love those I saw as competition?

3. Embrace What God has Given You (Stop Wind-Chasing)

“Do not set your hearts on leaving a permanent mark on the world...through your work, or you will burn out. Only God knows the end results of your work, not you. Just enjoy what is at hand”.

“Serve others with everything you have (Eccl 9:10) without worrying about the end results or being envious (4:4)” of others who seem to be excelling beyond you. God has apportioned all manner of absurdities under the sun. Leave the results of your work with God and keep your eye on the plow in front of you.



Since God placed mastery outside our reach, simply enjoy each good thing as it comes. It is our illusion of mastery – and our identification of the value of our work (and our lives) with this mastery – from which Qohelet [the Teacher] seeks to deliver us.”

- Eric Ortland

4. Aim at Faithfulness

Be *faithful*: loving God, loving the people around you, and doing the tasks God has given you. Receive them with joy. The Teacher, who is concerned primarily to help us live wisely and well this side of eternity, says: “A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?”

- Eccl 2:24-25

“What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”

- Matthew 16:26

5. Enjoy God's Good Gifts

Listen to how the Teacher says it in 9:7: “Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has *already approved* what you do.”

Already approved?

“I take Qohelet to be saying that before we achieve what we want in our work (if we ever do), God is already smiling on us. God is pleased with us irrespective of what we do or do not accomplish.”

- Eric Ortland

“...here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.” (12:13). To “fear God” means to revere him. It’s to care more about what God thinks of us than what people think, and line ourselves up with at. When we do, we can know “God has already approved what you do...” (9:7).

6. Resting in God

How do we develop and nurture this perspective when our world, and even the bend of our own hearts, often pressures us otherwise?

Keeping Sabbath – Taking a Day for Rest and Worship

Keeping Sabbath is a way of saying, “I don’t need to keep producing,” God takes care of me. It’s a time to gather for worship with God’s people and celebrate what God has done. It’s a way to say, with our bodies, and our schedules: “I trust you, God. I am not the ‘master of my destiny’, you are! I can “cease striving” and just “be still.”

Life Group Discussion and Reflection

Questions:

1. In the message, Pastor Dave referred to the “Fear of Not Being Amazing” that sociologists have pointed to in recent years – which includes a fear of being seen as ordinary, boring, or of failing if we try something new. In what ways have you personally felt the “*Fear of Not Being Amazing*”?

2. Jacob Harder writes the following: “The purpose of your life is not to achieve, not to strive, not to make your mark on the world. It’s to stand in awe of God and enjoy life as God has made it. When we take the time to stand in awe of God...we will find that our Fear of Not Being Amazing slowly evaporates and comes to be replaced with the Fear of the Lord and the peace that comes when we stand in awe of God.” Discuss. How have you found that to be true? How might you move toward that place?

3. Read **Ecclesiastes 1:9-11 & 1:15**. In this section, we are told that “there is nothing new under the sun.” And just a few verses later that “what is crooked cannot be made straight.” These refer to the idea that human achievement is not ultimately capable of ‘breaking free’ of the regularities of nature. What does this mean for those of us who try to make our mark on the world through our achievements?

4. Read **Ecclesiastes 3:12-14, Luke 12:22-26, and Philippians 4:4-9**.

- o Discuss what these passages have in common.
- o What kind of attitude do these passages teach us to have toward fear and achievement? What do they teach us to do with our fears about not achieving?

5. Read **Psalm 46:10**. What might change in your life if you were to remember that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9) and chose the path of resting in God’s order and in contentment?

Prayer: Take some time to pray in response; pray for each other in the answers you heard from your group. Invite God’s gracious presence into the places where you have been ‘striving’ or wind-chasing.

