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Q&A#9 Is Ecclesiastes Nihilistic?

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Today's Question: Ecclesiastes is a book that has long confused me. Its descriptions of all of life as vanity come off nihilistic and despairing. And yet it also speaks of God, of being grateful to him, of recognizing his judgment, and fearing him and obeying his commandments. I don't understand how these things cohere. How do you understand the book of Ecclesiastes? Is it entirely trustworthy?

Leave your own questions in the comments, on my blog, or on my Curious Cat account.

<http://alastairadversaria.com/>

<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>

Transcript

Hello again. I'm coming back to answering questions after a while away. And I thought I'd start with this particular question about the book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is a book that has long confused me. Its descriptions of all of life as vanity come off as nihilistic and despairing. And yet it also speaks of God, of being grateful to him, of recognizing his judgment, and fearing him and obeying his commandments.

I don't understand how these things cohere. How do you understand the book of Ecclesiastes? Is it entirely trustworthy? It's a very good question. I find one of the things that helped me to understand the book of Ecclesiastes was the translation of the word that is usually translated vanity, the word hebel.

And the translation vapor, which is a more literal translation of that term, helps to open up the meaning of that book in a number of different ways. So what is vapor? Vapor can be like a fog, something that we can't see through. It shrouds and it veils a reality.

And so we're groping through it and trying to make our way through something that is obscuring our path and our vision. It's also something we can't read through. We can't

understand.

It's something that we can't predict the way that vapor moves. Vapors move in strange manners and we can't shepherd them. As the book of Ecclesiastes speaks about shepherding the wind, it's impossible to shepherd the wind.

The wind moves where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes. And it's something you can't control. And vapor is like that.

Vapor is something that is fleeting and ephemeral. It is there for a short period of time and then it passes away and vanishes. It's something that leaves no permanent mark.

It makes no effect upon the world. It doesn't leave its mark in the soil. It does not leave its mark upon the rock.

And it's insubstantial. It's got no substance to it. It's not formed of anything.

It's not got weight and gravity to it. And so this is a very powerful core metaphor for the book of Ecclesiastes because vapor is something that is a great way to characterize human existence. Human existence is like vapor.

It's something that's brief and transitory. It doesn't last. It's something that's insubstantial.

It's like a breath of wind that passes away. It's something that doesn't leave much of an effect upon the world. The world keeps on going.

It's like we build our sand castles on the shore and then the sea comes in and it moves them away. And no mark is left the next morning. And so there's this movement of time and our attempts to make gain, to achieve something, to get purchase upon reality, they all fail and crumble eventually.

They may last for a few years. In some cases, they may even last for centuries. But ultimately, they all come crumbling down.

Life is like a vapor. Life does not have the power to exert the sort of influence upon reality that we would like. It can't control reality.

And it's a veil. The vapor is a veil that prevents us from seeing through to the true reality of things, to the heart of things, to what is really going on. Now, this metaphor is the metaphor that the book of Ecclesiastes is unpacking.

It's revealing the futility of all of our attempts to control our reality, to control our world, and showing that all of them in their different ways, even when exercised according to wisdom and prudence and discretion, a mind as great as Solomon's, that they'll all come

crumbling down. They won't ultimately succeed. This is the character of what life is under the sun, life that is bound by the futility of our vaporous existence.

And God has established this realm, this veil between heaven and earth. And life lived beneath the veil, beneath the firmament, beneath that veil is vaporous. It's weak.

It does not have long term effects and consequences. And so throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon is trying to get some purchase on reality, some gain, some profit to find out reality, to perceive, to see through, to see what's really there. So he's trying to see through, he's trying to get profit to make some impact, and he's trying to leave a mark.

And he tries that through pleasure to find meaning in this way, or wisdom, or through work. And all of these things, in some way or other, prove futile. They aren't the sort of things that you can predict, ultimately.

The results are unpredictable. It may depend upon your child. You may invest the whole of your life in laying up resources for your children and preparing them for their future.

And then they prove to be foolish, and they waste everything. So you don't know what's going to happen. We can't control reality.

And is this a nihilistic message? Well, if that's all you're saying, then maybe it could be. We can try and form and fill our world to create our reality, and it falls apart, ultimately. It can't really stay.

It is like those sandcastles on the beach that will be washed away when the tide comes in. But when God forms and fills his world, it lasts. Ours soon perishes and passes away, but God's remains.

And this need not be a depressing and dark message. This is a profoundly Christian vision of creation. It's a vision of creation that takes into account what the difference between the creator and the creature is.

As creatures, we are not the creator. We do not have the power to say, and it remains so. We can have a limited effect upon our world, but our creation is but a limited and a weak reflection of what God's creation is.

And so beneath the firmament, within this realm of vaporous activity, human life, action and thought are all fleeting. They all fail to perceive and break through to the true reality of things. They all lack much purchase upon reality, and they don't leave much behind.

It may last for a few years, but your memory will fade. People will forget who you were, what difference you made. We all pass from the earth like breath, a breath that has passed from someone's lips and then disappears.

Now, this need not be a depressing message when we understand the place that God fits within the picture. So much of our lives are spent trying to control things, to get things in our grasp, to understand things, to gain purchase on reality, to leave some sort of mark, to make some name for ourselves, whatever it is. And Ecclesiastes tells us that all of this is ultimately vapor.

All of this is not going to leave a mark. All of this is characterized by the weakness and the frailty and the insufficiency and the impotence of human life, of flesh. Human beings are like vapor.

But yet God is the one who can shepherd the wind. God is the one who is above the reality of the vapor. God is the one who does not live under the sun, but the one who created the sun.

And we, if we think of our task as being that of shepherding the wind, of trying to achieve this gain, of trying to achieve this task of seeing through to reality, of the deepest reality that there is, or trying to control things to make things go the way that we want them to go, we'll ultimately set ourselves up for failure and for frustration. And so Ecclesiastes presents us with a better way, a way of wisdom that does not neglect the tasks that we have on this earth, but puts them in their proper perspective. So all of these things can be enjoyed.

God's good gifts can be held with an open hand and we can appreciate what he has given us and we can work within the world, all while recognizing that it is ultimately vapor. It passes away. That human activity is frail and insufficient to make the mark that we want to.

But yet, as we trust God, we have someone who is not bound by the limits of human providence. We can live according to his providence. We're no longer seeking for fixity and security in our own creation or in the creation itself, but in the giver of all good gifts, in the creator, the one who gives us our breath, the one who created the vapor, the one who constantly gives forth reality as his bestowal.

And so when we're relying upon the God in heaven, the God who is in heaven, rather than upon insubstantial reality to gain purchase upon things, we have a very different perspective upon what we're doing. First of all, it tends to, it tends to defeat any of our messianic projects. The idea is that we are supposed to save the creation.

We can't do that. We're limited in what we can do. We can recognize God's power and we can work to the best of our ability, but without having that sense that we need to control the vapor or shepherd the wind.

We can't do that. Rather, we are grasped by God himself and God's word is what will remain secure, even as our actions fail. And so the vapor will pass.

The vapor is something that we'll be groping through for the whole of our lives. But God is the spirit, the one who moves. The one person of the spirit is the one who moves like the spirit, like the wind that goes where it wishes.

And in the same way, the Christian or the believing person has a different relationship to the vapor than the person who's just purely trapped within it, purely confined by it and unable to present that reality in its proper place as something that is limited, as something that is defined by its being under the sun. It's defined by being under God's control as well. It's not as if God is part of the vapor or God is limited by the vapor.

Rather, the vapor is the limited character of created existence, the frailty of human flesh, the transitory character of our lives. And as we hold that, we can hold things lightly. We can hold things in a way that appreciates the gift, but does not seek to press the gift for more than is given within it.

Rather, we can recognize the joy in some sense of being people who do not have to control everything, who can be at ease in God's world. It's the recipients of God's good gifts, whatever God gives, whether that's trouble or whether it's blessing, that we are people who are within this vapor, whose lives are limited, but who serve a good God who is above the vapor. And as we lay up treasure with him and as we enjoy his good gifts, we have a relationship to the vapor that is no longer bound by it.

And I think this is what the book of Ecclesiastes is really trying to get at. One of the best ways that we can sum up this vision is within a particular psalm. Psalm 39, I think, puts this very well.

The whole vision of Ecclesiastes, I think, is reflected to some degree within these verses. Starting at verse four. Surely they busy themselves in vain.

He heaps up riches and does not know who will gather them. And now, Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you. Deliver me from all my transgressions.

Do not make me the reproach of the foolish. I was mute. I did not open my mouth because it was you who did it.

Remove your plague from me. I'm consumed by the blow of your hand. When with rebukes you correct man for iniquity, you make his beauty melt away like a moth.

Surely every man is vapor. Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry. Do not be silent at my tears, for I'm a stranger with you, a sojourner, as all my fathers were.

Remove your gaze from me that I may regain strength before I go away and am no more. Very powerful vision of what it means to see our lives in a true perspective. That perspective that Ecclesiastes has is not a perspective that's purely bound and constrained by the vapor itself.

Rather, it's one that can be we can perceive the vapor truly and the transitory character of it, the limited character, the way that it leaves little mark, the way that it's frail and does not have the ability to gain purchase upon things and it's obscuring reality, all these sorts of things. We can see all of that in a way that is not nihilistic because it is seen as an aspect of God's of the creation relative to God, its creator, the God who is eternal. The God who does not depend upon any other for his being.

The God who does not change and age and decay or die. The God who is. Who is ever with us.

The God who is not. Hidden, whose to whom reality is not hidden. The God who knows all the God who sees all.

And that gives us a sense of what the vapor is, by contrast. And by contrast, the vapor is not an emptiness so much as it's the sheer gratuity of creation. The fact that it's all received as a fragile gift.

The creation is but God's word on the breath of his spirit and it passes away. But the giver remains. The giver is the one that we should be constantly returning to.

And Ecclesiastes presents us with this in a way that limits the pretensions of human beings, but draws them back to their creation, their creator. It shows the blessing, but also the limitation of wisdom, of work, of our labor, of our pleasure and all these sorts of things that are constrained by the short number of our days. But yet, as it draws our attention back to God, it enables us to live joyfully within the limited frame and scope of our existence.

To see that as a realm of gift, not a realm of emptiness and the void, then the abyss that stands out before us. But rather recognizing that all of our existence is nothing in itself. It's just like a vapor suspended upon God's work, upon his word and his wisdom, upon his breath and his spirit that holds everything together in the word of his son.

And so this is something that gives us confidence and ability to enjoy reality without needing to control everything. And I find that a very encouraging and a Christian message. So I think the book of Ecclesiastes is not one that we should be scared of.