



meaningless



unfair



absurd



MILES CUSTIS

## Does the Author of Ecclesiastes Need Prozac?

The author of Ecclesiastes is often labeled a depressed pessimist.<sup>1</sup> But a careful study reveals the author to be an honest—and hopeful!—realist about life, not a candidate for Prozac.

It's easy to understand why people think Ecclesiastes is depressing, or think that the conclusion of the book is that life is meaningless. Verses like “And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive” (Eccl 4:2 NIV) make the book seem less than hopeful. Even its famous phrase “vanity of vanities”—found at the beginning and the end of the book (1:2; 12:8) makes the author sound like a complete pessimist. I've found, though, that if you give the book enough serious attention, Ecclesiastes reveals that the author is actually *hopeful*, and his message can easily be applied to each of us.

The refrain “vanity of vanities” (1:2 and 12:8) is where we find our first clue to the author's optimism. The translations “meaningless” (NIV) or “vanity” (NASB) come from the Hebrew word *hebel* (הבל). This word occurs in Ecclesiastes far more frequently than in any other book of the Old Testament (38 of 73 occurrences). Neither “meaningless” nor “vanity” quite fits the way it is used in Ecclesiastes. Sometimes *hebel* emphasizes the brevity of life; at other times it speaks to the futility of life. Most often, however, the author uses *hebel* to judge situations as senseless, absurd, unreasonable, or unfair. For example, in 2:21 the fact that the author must leave his fortune to someone who did not earn it seems “unfair” to him (*not* just “worthless” or “vain”). Likewise, in 8:14 it seems “senseless” to the author that the outcomes of a righteous or a wicked life are reversed.




vain

# worthless

The author's main point in using *hebel* is to show that life often does not make sense and that neither he (being extremely wise; see 1:16 and 12:9) nor anyone else can explain the senseless situations that life can bring. Life is contradictory, and human ability to understand life in all of its contradictions is limited.

The limitation of human wisdom is an important theme in Ecclesiastes. The author's goal was to understand life (1:13), but it is a goal he was unable to reach. In fact, it is a goal which no one can reach (8:16–17).

But doesn't this make the author a pessimist? The answer can be found in 3:10–17. This passage affirms that God is the One who controls “the times.” He has made everything “beautiful” or “good” in its time (3:11a). We are not able fully understand everything He has done (3:11b; 8:17). It is clear that He is the One in control (3:14a). “God does [all this in mystery] so that man will fear him” (3:14). The proper response to living in a chaotic world, with situations that are often beyond our control, is to put our trust in the One who is in control—God.

Rather than a message of gloom, Ecclesiastes gives us hope: while life might be full of injustice and absurdity (3:16), we can trust that God is in control and ultimately justice will prevail (3:17).<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes points out life's difficulties, but does not call for despair. The book's conclusion drives the point home (12:13): “This is end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this applies to everyone.” 

## Some Occurrences of *Hebel* (הבל) in Ecclesiastes (ESV) with Miles Custis' Translations Inserted

### Ecclesiastes 2:18–21

I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me,<sup>19</sup> and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is *absurd*.<sup>20</sup> So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun,<sup>21</sup> because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is *unfair* and a great evil.

### Ecclesiastes 8:14–17

There is a senselessness that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is *absurd*.<sup>15</sup> And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.<sup>16</sup> When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep,<sup>17</sup> then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

<sup>1</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*. (Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), pgs. 23–28.

<sup>2</sup> See Eccl 2:24–25; 3:12–13; 3:22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7–9; 11:9–12:1.

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