

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 8
August 3, 2025
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Is it really all vapor?

¹The words of Ecclesiastes, David's son, king in Jerusalem.

²"Nothing but vapor," Ecclesiastes said. "Totally vapor. Everything is just vapor that vanishes."

¹²I, Ecclesiastes, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³I applied my heart to seek out and explore with wisdom everything done under the sky. (What a burdensome task God has given the children of Adam to keep them busy!) ¹⁴I have seen all the actions done under the sun, and, look, it is all nothing but vapor. It is all chasing the wind.

¹⁸I also hated all the results of my hard work, for which I worked so hard under the sun, since I must leave it all to the man who comes after me. ¹⁹And who knows—will he be wise, or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the results of my hard work, for which I worked so hard and so wisely, under the sun. This too is vapor that vanishes.

²⁰So I changed my course, and my heart began to despair over all my hard work at which I worked so hard under the sun. ²¹Sure, there may be a man who has worked hard—wisely, aptly, and skillfully. But he must hand over whatever he accumulated by all his hard work to a man who has not worked hard for it. This too is vapor. It's so unfair! ²²For what does a man gain through all his hard work, through all the turmoil in his heart, as he works so hard under the sun?

²³Pain fills all his days. His occupation is frustration. Even at night his heart does not rest. This too is vapor.

²⁴There is nothing better for a man than to eat and to drink and to find joy in his work. This too, I saw, is from God's hand. ²⁵For who can eat or enjoy himself apart from him? ²⁶Yes, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness to the man whom he considers good, but to the person who goes on sinning God gives the task of gathering and collecting, but only so that he can give it all to a person whom God considers good. This too is vapor, nothing but chasing wind.

—Ecclesiastes 1:1,2,12-14; 2:18-26 EHV

Imagine this scenario. Approximately 3,000 years ago, the people stood in the courtyard of the temple built by King Solomon. It was one of the most beautiful, elegant buildings that ever stood on the face of the earth. It took seven years for Solomon's workers to build. As the people stand before this beautiful building, facing the entrance to the temple, they can see the two massive pillars with their cast bronze capitals. As a tribute to the Lord, his God, Solomon had named those pillars *Jakin* and *Boaz*. The names reminded the people "God establishes," and "in him is strength."

As you stand there with awe at the beauty of the edifice, suddenly the king and his attendants enter the scene. Here stands the great King Solomon. He is known throughout the world for his unmatched wisdom and his fabulous wealth. He wears a crown of gold and a scarlet robe. He is bigger than life itself. The crowd sees this superstar enter their midst.

But as he moves closer to the crowd, you see that he is an old man. No longer did he have youthful, smooth skin. No, this was a man who has gone through many years of life. And as you stare into his eyes, you notice that they communicate weariness and sorrow. He's seen a lot, and in many ways, he is worn out from life.

How could that be? He had it all. He lived life to the fullest. He had everything anyone could possibly want. And yet he seemed so empty. So shattered. So broken.

You see, God had pronounced his judgment on Solomon. Because Solomon turned his heart to many wives and followed after their many gods by sacrificing to them, the LORD was angry with Solomon. In fact, the LORD once said to Solomon, **"Because this is your attitude, and because you did not keep my covenant and my statutes which I commanded you, I will surely rip the kingdom out of your hands and give it to your servant"** (1 Kings 11:11).

This is the man who stands before the crowd. And his ears must still have been ringing with God's judgment. In fact, he doesn't even use his own name as he begins his speech before the crowd. Instead of calling himself "Solomon," which means peace, he calls himself "Ecclesiastes," which means "teacher" or "preacher." Perhaps he doesn't feel worthy of his name, but he knows he must share his experience. Humbled, he begins his speech. **The**

words of Ecclesiastes, David's son, king in Jerusalem. "Nothing but vapor," Ecclesiastes said. "Totally vapor. Everything is just vapor that vanishes."

In the midst of all the grandeur, a temple and a palace which seem to soar over the landscape of the earth, the first word from this powerful king is "Hevel." Hevel? It's translated as "vapor" in our text. Some other translations include "meaningless" or "vanity" or "absolute futility." But the idea is still the same. It reminds me of standing outside in the middle of January in Wisconsin. You breathe out. You see your breath for a moment, and then it disappears.

"Everything is just vapor that vanishes." Or another phrase that he likes to use is **"chasing the wind."**

Solomon says that everything in this world, everything under heaven, everything under the sun, everything is something we may try to grasp and hold on to, but all it does is quickly disappear. It's like a wind that you try to grab and hold in your fingers, but all that you find in your hand is nothing.

Is that really true? **Is it really all vapor?** Oh, I suppose I can see that to an extent. Life is so fleeting and so unstable. At times, life seems to be so vain and frustrating, empty and without purpose. All we have to do is pause and observe. Life is filled with hustle and bustle. We see so much tinsel and glitter. And underneath it all, what do we sense? We get that terrible sense of emptiness.

I've seen it. I'm sure you have, too. You buy that shiny new car. Oh, it feels so good to drive down the road in that beauty. But then fuel pump goes out and leaves you stranded on the side of the road. "Hevel." Vapor. Just ask the people affected by the floods in Texas or in Beijing, China. How quickly their properties were destroyed! In their hands one moment and gone the next. The apostle James is also right when he says, **"You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? Indeed, it is a mist that appears for a little while and then disappears"** (James 4:14).

So, King Solomon shares his experience with the crowd. He lived life to the fullest. And having done so, he could personally talk about the emptiness of life. So, even though I may ask the question, **"Is it really all vapor?"** I guess it's worth listening to his words. **"I, Ecclesiastes, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my heart to seek out and explore with wisdom everything done under the sky. (What a burdensome task God has given the children of Adam to keep them busy!) I have seen all the actions done under the sun, and, look, it is all nothing but vapor. It is all chasing the wind."**

Maybe you recall Solomon in his younger days as king. The Lord invited him to ask for anything in the world. Do you remember what Solomon asked for? It wasn't for riches. It wasn't for the conquest of his enemies. No. When Solomon started as king, he asked for one thing from the Lord. "Please give me *wisdom* as I rule." And the Lord richly blessed him with wisdom. He had such a vast intellectual treasury that people from all over the world would come to just listen to him lecture on various topics. So, he applied his heart to seek out and explore with wisdom everything done in this world.

And one of the first things he concluded was that God has laid a heavy burden on mankind. How so? How many of you have had things that break in your life? Maybe you've had to replace an air conditioning unit in your home. Maybe you have had to replace your water pressure regulator. Maybe termites have gotten in your walls. Maybe your car breaks down, and you need a lot of repairs on it. Maybe you have lost something valuable to you.

When those things happen, what does that do to you? You get that pit in your stomach. That uneasy feeling. Maybe you are anxious. Frustrated. Maybe you are worried. How are we going to pay for all these expenses?

Do you know why these things happen in our lives? It goes all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When they sinned against God, in other words, when they said that God wasn't enough for them and they wanted something more, they rebelled against God. They didn't trust God. They sinned. And God said that because of that sin, they would have frustration and pain in their lives. It was the weeds in the garden! And that frustration and pain come to every single person who lives in this world. It comes to you and to me.

Right? So, in Solomon's wisdom he looks at the world and concludes that God kept his promise that because of sin we would experience a heavy burden. And he realizes that everything is "Hevel." It's a vapor. You try to hold on to it, but it just seeps through your fingers. Life is filled with burdens and difficulties. That's the curse of sin we all experience.

And the ultimate example of that is when we have to leave this world, right? You can't take it with you.

Solomon looks at all his efforts in this world and comes to this conclusion. **"I also hated all the results of my hard work, for which I worked so hard under the sun, since I must leave it all to the man who comes after me. ¹⁹And who knows—will he be wise, or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the results of my hard work, for which I worked so hard and so wisely, under the sun. This too is vapor that vanishes. ²⁰So I changed my course, and my heart began to despair over all my hard work at which I worked so hard**

under the sun. ²¹Sure, there may be a man who has worked hard—wisely, aptly, and skillfully. But he must hand over whatever he accumulated by all his hard work to a man who has not worked hard for it. This too is vapor. It's so unfair! ²²For what does a man gain through all his hard work, through all the turmoil in his heart, as he works so hard under the sun? ²³Pain fills all his days. His occupation is frustration. Even at night his heart does not rest. This too is vapor.”

Do you share his frustration? A person struggles and sweats for a lifetime, but he goes down to the grave without any guarantee that what he leaves behind will be appreciated or used wisely. And just those thoughts can drive a person to restlessness. Have you ever worked so hard for something during the day and then tossed and turned at night wondering what will happen to it?

When we lived in California, we had our house broken into twice. The first time was when we were on vacation. Some members called us to let us know that someone had ransacked our home. Everything was tossed and turned; much of it was stolen and gone. And then it happened again a year later. We had a family day, and as I was driving home, I had this uneasy thought, “Oh, I hope nobody broke into our house again.” Guess what? Yup. I drove into the driveway, and sure enough, the front door was wide open. The window was broken. Someone broke into our house again. Fortunately, the alarm system I put in the house scared them away.

We have loud, barking dogs now, so that also helps. But isn't what Solomon is saying true? **“Pain fills all his days. His occupation is frustration. Even at night his heart does not rest. This too is vapor.”**

So, as Solomon searched everything in this world, he found it all wanting. And yet, we live here. And I still ask the question, **“Is it really all vapor?”** How should we live? Should we live as though the things of this world don't matter? I still need a roof over my head. I still need clothes on my back. I still need things for my life here. So, how should we live?

Well, actually the answer to those questions is what Solomon is going to slowly reveal in the rest of his speech. If you have the time, I'd encourage you to read through the entire book of Ecclesiastes this week. If you read it out loud, it will take about 40 minutes to get through. And what you will notice is that Solomon gradually points to God's control in the midst of everything that is vapor.

In fact, right at the end of our reading, we start to see that shift. **“There is nothing better for a man than to eat and to drink and to find joy in his work. This too, I saw, is from God's hand. ²⁵For who can eat or enjoy himself apart from him? ²⁶Yes, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness to the man whom he considers good, but to the person who goes on sinning God gives the task of gathering and collecting, but only so that he can give it all to a person whom God considers good. This too is vapor, nothing but chasing wind.”**

Solomon says that the best a person can do is **“to eat and drink and to find joy in his work.”** But how can we find satisfaction in our work when Ecclesiastes, this teacher, this preacher, has so powerfully demonstrated that labor is a vapor. The answer is found in these words, **“This is from God's hand.”** Only from God can we truly find meaning and purpose and even true enjoyment. You see, what we need is wisdom, knowledge and happiness *from God's hand*.

Here, as well as throughout this book, Solomon makes a distinction between believers and unbelievers. He doesn't use those words exactly, but the teaching is there.

For example, whom does God consider *good*? We know from the prophet Isaiah that as sinners, even our best efforts are still filthy rags in God's sight. So, whom does God consider *good*? The writer to the Hebrews tells us, **“Without faith it is impossible to please God”** (11:6).

Faith in what? Faith in Jesus as the substitute Savior. Faith simply receives all the perfection and righteousness of God that Jesus gives. I sometimes use the illustration of eyeglasses. If I take my glasses off, no offense, but you look like a mess. That's how God sees us just in ourselves. Our lives are a sinful mess.

But if he looks at us through Jesus, if he sees us through the righteous deeds of Christ and his perfect life, if he puts his “Jesus-glasses” on to look at us, he sees perfection. Faith trusts what Jesus has done for us.

So, Solomon contrasts a believer, someone who pleases God and does good, with an unbeliever, an unrepentant sinner.

Now, at first, this doesn't seem to fit with reality. I mean, often the ungodly are very wealthy. They seem to have no problems in this world. Everything seems to fall into place for them. But here's a huge difference between an unbeliever and a believer. Only believers can truly possess the whole world, because they enjoy it with happiness and tranquility. What do I mean by that?

Let me give you some practical ways you can do that as God's children. How do you truly enjoy with happiness and tranquility all these things that Solomon frequently calls "vapor"?

Well, first of all, recognize that they *are* vapor. They don't last. I think you know that. But it helps to remember that when you are stranded on the side of the road with a faulty fuel pump. It helps to remember that when your AC goes out in the house. Of course it will. It's vapor. It doesn't last. We live in a world broken by sin. God said that there would be weeds in the garden. It's good to remember that because I need to remember that this isn't my home. So, even when my stuff falls apart and breaks, this serves as a reminder that something greater is in store for me. Right?

But let me also give you another perspective on things. Saint Augustine, who lived approximately 1,600 years ago, taught that everything we see with our eyes is intended to teach us something we can only see with faith. Jesus loved to teach this way. He would often use things we see as a way of teaching spiritual truths.

For example, he would use water from a well to teach the Samaritan woman that only he could quench her thirsty soul. Or he directs our eyes to the birds of the air who receive food from God's hand as an illustration for us to trust that God will provide for our lives.

And that's another thing for us to keep in mind. Recognize that these blessings are "**from God's hand.**" He knows how to take care of you. While you have those blessings, see the hand of the Lord behind them. In fact, look through those blessings to what God is teaching you on the other side. Do you need a roof over your head? As I see my roof over my head, which is vapor, I am reminded of the truth that God is my refuge and fortress. Do you need food when you are hungry and drink when you are thirsty? As I see the food on my plate and the drink in my cup, which is vapor, I am reminded that God actually fills my deepest needs. So, as God's children, we can look at all these blessings from God and see the hand of the Lord behind them.

One final encouragement for you. You get the impression that Solomon was down in the dumps when he realized that everything that he worked for would be left for someone else. He probably looked at his own son Rehoboam and knew his son was a foolish man. So, he didn't want to leave it for him, but he had to.

I don't want to put any judgment on your children or grandchildren. Maybe your children or grandchildren will carry your legacy forward. But I would ask you to prayerfully consider leaving a legacy for the Lord's work. Some people have left their estate to support gospel ministry. So, once they leave this world and enjoy the blessings of heaven, their earthly possessions can still be used to bring the good news of Jesus to others.

So, **is it really all vapor?** In many ways, yes. The stuff we have won't last. We can't take it with us. But with a proper view of things through faith in Jesus, we can actually see that it's more than vapor. These are useful resources that God gives to us to teach us, to sustain us, and to support us as we live lives to glorify God and to serve others. Amen.