

Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

Qoheleth: MythBuster

Main Point

Humanity gains nothing from all its toil, because all is *hebel* (fleeting, elusive, contradictory).

Application

Recognize and believe that all is *hebel*: don't think you can control life or have a lasting impact.

Purpose

1. To give people tools to read Ecclesiastes for themselves
2. To unsettle people: Ecclesiastes challenges some cherished beliefs, 'busts some myths'

Introduction: Restaurants vs cooking shows

I have a complex relationship with food. On the one hand, I'm a very fussy eater, but on the other I also love dishes from a wide range of cuisines — the various subsets of French, Italian, Thai, Chinese, Indian, contemporary Australian, and so on.

On the one hand, I love quality. I love novelty. I love dishes with complex, layered flavours and textures. I love the way that when you first taste a good laksa, it's all coconut creamy sweetness; then, as it sits in your mouth you start to sense just a hint of lemon grass and cumin and turmeric and sambal oelek, and somehow the fish sauce makes the whole flavour fuller; then as you swallow and breathe, there are delicious fresh lime and coriander top-notes that come over the chilli tingliness.

At the same time, I'm very happy to make myself tinned spaghetti on toast.

I've always enjoyed experimenting with food flavours, with mixed success, admittedly. Mostly, though, I find that if I taste a dish at a friend's place or at a restaurant, I can identify what's in it, and recreate or the flavours or make them better suited to my liking as I toy around with my own version at home.

Perhaps for that reason, I've also always enjoyed cooking shows. It wasn't until I was thinking about this talk that I realized what a long love affair I've had with cooking shows. It began when I was quite a small child, and I was very committed to watching [PPT] *Come and Get It*, with Peter Russell Clarke.

Shortly afterward, I discovered Gabriel Gaté [PPT], then Ian Parmenter [PPT]. I always found Jeff Jansz [PPT] and Hewy [PPT] far too prosaic [PPT], but I couldn't get enough of the *Two Fat Ladies* [PPT], who loved cheese almost as much as Peter Russell-Clarke.

At present, I'm still enjoying Jamie Oliver [PPT], but my current favourite is Manu on *Ready, Steady, Cook*. [PPT]

[PPT — BLANK]

What I love about cooking shows is the way that you can see how they put the whole thing together. You can see what tools they use, and what ingredients. You don't have to guess.

And the skills that you learn from watching a cooking show can be applied to any number of dishes. I find that when I see something new on a cooking show, immediately I'm feeling creative and confident to use that new technique or new ingredient in any number of ways to create my own dishes.

For the next four weeks, we're going to be looking at Ecclesiastes — a book that gives me good Biblical warrant to enjoy food.

And given the Bible's (ahem) high view of food, it's interesting that God's word itself can be likened to a meal:

"Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut 8:3).

Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever" (John 6:51).

Both Paul (1 Cor 3:2) and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews (Heb 5:12) talk about giving their readers milk and solid food in the form of Christian teachings.

And that's a big part of what we do together as a church, on Sundays and during the week: we seek spiritual nourishment as we read God's word together and by ourselves.

Usually on Sundays, we're served up a meal of God's word that the preacher has put time into, in order to make it appetizing, easily digestible, and good for us.

And that's more or less what I'm planning to do in the three weeks after this. Tonight, however, I want to propose that we do something that resembles a cooking show more than a restaurant.

That is, I want to be open about my techniques: what is it that has gone into my thinking about Ecclesiastes? Because my suspicion is that Ecclesiastes will be about as foreign to us as bok choy is to retirees in Gunnedah. We don't know what to do with it.

So at the end of the evening, I trust that we still will have prepared a meal, but it will be in such a way that you'll know how I've gone about it, and you can replicate it for yourself.

I want to give you the skills to get a lot out of Ecclesiastes. Because if you really want to make the most of the next four weeks, you'll need to spend some time reading the book yourself.

Will you pray with me as we begin this rather ambitious project?

Almighty and everliving God, we thank you for your Word. Thank you that you nourish us by it. Please help us tonight and for the next four weeks as we read Ecclesiastes. Help us to hear what you have to say to us. Please so give us of your Spirit that we be willing to change in response. Amen.

1 Some difficulties of reading Ecclesiastes

So what are some of the difficulties of reading Ecclesiastes?

a who is the writer?

I think the first difficulty we encounter is that we want to know who the writer is, but we can't quite find out.

- **Qoheleth**

The book is introduced in 1:1 as 'The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.'

The words of the Teacher. The word 'teacher' doesn't really capture what is meant, here. The Hebrew word is Qoheleth; the Greek word is Ecclesiastes, predictably enough.

It's a word that might mean 'the leader of the assembly' — that is, when Israel assembled together, they had someone lead them, a Qoheleth.

Or the word might just mean 'a gatherer' — someone who brings things together.

Even though it's not a proper name, I've come to think of the speaker in this book as Qoheleth, so I'm going to refer to him as such throughout these talks.

- **a veiled identity**

But who is this Qoheleth? Well, 1:1 says he is 'a son of David, a king in Jerusalem'.

At first, that makes you think of King Solomon. He was the son of David who became king when David died. But just jump down with me to verse 16 of chapter 1:

16 I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than **anyone** who has ruled over Jerusalem before me."

It sounds like there have been **a number** of kings over Jerusalem before him, not just one.

Furthermore, as you read through the book, you find that some passages are written from the perspective of a subject, rather than a king (5:8–9; cf. 8:1–9).

So, perhaps Qoheleth is a king of Jerusalem, but one who is able to put himself in the shoes of the man in the street.

For me, it's impossible to tie down the identity of Qoheleth. So the speaker in this book remains a bit mysterious. His identity is veiled. And this takes away one of the important hooks we can use when we're trying to get a handle on a book.

b wisdom literature

I think the second big difficulty we have as we read Ecclesiastes is that it's wisdom literature. That is, it's a kind of Biblical writing we're not all that comfortable with. We're not quite sure how to treat it.

Job, Song of Songs and Proverbs are the other major examples in the Bible — none of them is an easy book to integrate with the rest of our theology.

I spoke about laksa before, and I remember when I first discovered Thai food. It was 1998, and I'd only recently moved to Sydney. I'd grown up with a mixture of stock-standard Australian fare and Chinese food of varying degrees of authenticity.

I'd just spent twelve months abroad, and I was well across provincial French cookery.

So if you served me up something French or Chinese, I could have had a decent guess as to what was in it.

But when I first tasted Thai food, I had no idea what had gone into it. Here were flavours I'd never encountered before. I certainly couldn't replicate those flavours at home. I just knew I loved them!

I think that likewise, when we first encounter Ecclesiastes, we probably won't know how it's been put together. I doubt that we'll love it. It's an acquired taste. It's quite likely to leave us feeling deeply unsettled — somewhat like a dodgy vindaloo.

Under point 1b on your outlines — wisdom literature — I've put a series of dot points that show some of the things that lead to this sense of unsettledness.

- **no YHWH, and no salvation history**

Firstly, no YHWH and no salvation history.

The Bible tells one big story of how God saves — what we call 'salvation history'.

And usually when we come to a book of the Bible, we'll want to see where it fits in salvation history, in the Bible's big picture.

It's worth reminding ourselves briefly of the Bible's big story: God creates the world; he places Adam and Eve in the Garden [PPT]; and they walk face-to-face with God. But then they rebel against God; God expels them from his presence.

Then, [PPT] God promises to bless all of humanity through Abraham. We watch as his descendants, the nation of Israel [PPT], are placed in the land of Canaan, like a new Eden. Like Adam and Eve, Israel rebels against God. [PPT] God expels them from the land and they go into exile.

Then Jesus, God himself, comes in the flesh. [PPT] Unlike Adam and Eve, unlike Israel, he **obeys** God, [PPT] but chooses to die to pay the penalty of humanity's rebellion. He rises to life again, [PPT] and rules the universe.

We wait for him to return and make a new creation where once again humanity can walk face-to-face with God.

In all of this, God reveals his proper name, YHWH, [PPT] which is translated in our Bibles as LORD in capital letters. [Some drama] He's the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He's the God who brought Israel out of Egypt with a mighty outstretched arm.

YHWH is God's personal name, the name of covenant promise and fulfilment, of faithfulness, love and justice.

But in Ecclesiastes, God is never called YHWH, the LORD. [PPT — BLANK] There is no mention of his promise to Abraham, or his great saving acts in Israel.

Rather, God seems somewhat distant. He's described as the creator (12:1, 7; 3:20–21), and the judge (3:15, 17; 5:6; 8:5–6; 7:16–17; 11:9; 12:14). God is in control of everything, but it's hard to tell from looking at the world, because it is full of injustice. The good may be poor and die young; the wicked enjoy their riches to a ripe old age.

Of course, the fact that Qoheleth is described as 'a son of David and a king over Jerusalem' shows us that he is a member of God's covenant people, but that's not what occupies his mind.

- **a ground-up theological anthropology**

Rather, Qoheleth creates what I'm going to term a 'theological anthropology', as I've put on your outlines there.

It's an anthropology insofar as it looks at humanity, and humanity's place in the world.

But it's theological insofar as God is always present in this world, and always in control.

[REPEAT]

And Qoheleth's method is to move from the ground up. That is, Qoheleth doesn't start with what God has said about himself, say, through Moses or one of the other prophets.

Rather, he starts with what may be observed in and deduced from the world that God created. He builds his theological anthropology from the ground up.

- **'contradictions' (yes, but...)**

And some of Qoheleth's observations are contradictory. Consider these [PPT]:

2:26 To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God.

Sounds like standard retribution: you get what you deserve. But then,

8:14 There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve.

The laws of retribution are turned on their head: no just deserts here.

Or take this example:

1:18 With much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

And,

6:8 What advantage has a wise man over a fool?

It doesn't sound like wisdom is good for much except making you miserable. But then,

2:13 I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness.

Now, for some people, such contradictions are problematic. [PPT — BLANK]

But for me, I would expect that you would come up with contradictions when you look at the world.

As Oscar Wilde says, [PPT] "The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict themselves."

Because if you're wise, you can see that the world is messy. Life is not simple and neat. There's not a simple set of black-or-white rules that you can follow and somehow 'succeed at life'. [PPT — BLANK]

So as you look at things from different angles, you will see different truths.

It's what I call a 'yes, but...' formula: you say the world is like this. **Yes, but** it is also like that. 'Yes, but...'

Yes, Australia has one of the world's best hospital systems and medical benefits schemes, **but** there's an enormous waiting list for surgery in public hospitals, and people sometimes die when they can't get a place in emergency.

Yes, I'm worried about American cultural imperialism, **but** boy I'm glad Germany and Japan didn't win the war.

I think what these contradictions should teach us is that as we look at Ecclesiastes, and as we look at the world, we shouldn't seek always to apply simple rules. What the American pop-psychology industry hasn't worked out is that we will need **wisdom** to discern the best course of action — not just platitudes.

- **not straightforward, but four major movements**

Finally, I think reading Ecclesiastes is difficult because it's not a straightforward, logical argument.

As you read Ecclesiastes, you piece together its worldview. [PPT]

[PICK UP RUBBER ROLL]

God is the judge in heaven. On the earth, under the sun, humans work in a somewhat confused state, before they die and go to Sheol, the place of the dead.

Along the way, there are comments made about wisdom, about work, about money, about being a good subject. But it's not a systematic treatment of each topic. Rather, the worldview comes to us a bit like this:

[UNROLL RUBBER]

At first, the topics seem to be addressed in a random order: a bit of wisdom here, a bit of judgment there. You have to put the whole together from all the pieces, remembering that what's said about a certain subject now might be contradicted later. [PPT — BLANK]

So that's one of the reasons you'll need to read Ecclesiastes yourself. You'll need to build up your own picture of what the book says, and check that what I'm saying is what the book's saying.

I've included on your handouts there a very broad outline of the book, that may help you a bit. Just recognize, however, that it's very rough.

If you're finding the book difficult, and would like some more help, let me recommend Iain Provan's commentary, that I've noted on the bottom left-hand corner of the outline.

I've looked at a number of commentaries in preparing these talks, and I found Provan's far and away the most helpful. It's not technical, and it does an excellent job of helping us see how to apply the book.

2 A way forward

So reading Ecclesiastes has all these difficulties: we don't know who wrote it; it doesn't seem to fit in well with salvation history; it seems to make contradictory observations about the world; and they come to us in a mostly unstructured manner.

How then are we to proceed? What's the way forward?

Under point 2 on your outlines there, I've put 4 things that I think we should do, so I'll explain those very briefly, before we go ahead and do them with the first eleven verses of the book.

a embrace it

The first thing is, I think we should embrace Ecclesiastes. That is, I think we should recognize it for what it is, and enjoy it. We should live with the tensions. We shouldn't try to impose too much structure on it, or flatten out its theology by being overly systematic.

b listen to the original message

This will mean, of course, that we listen to its original message. What does Ecclesiastes mean, in its own terms?

At this point, all our instincts will scream that we should just talk about Jesus. We'll begin to hyperventilate as we hear the uncomfortable, unsettling message of the book, where the world is corrupt and mysterious and life is lived as if death is the end.

We'll want to reach for the paper bag of Jesus's death and resurrection to assure ourselves that it's all okay.

But we must resist that instinct. God has given us this book to teach us about good things that won't last, to teach us how to enjoy our brief lives under the sun.

The book has a purpose, and we must be faithful to that, rather than just run immediately to our theology.

c reflect on how this message cuts across our culture

And as we discern Ecclesiastes' message, we'll also be reflecting on how that message might cut across our culture, our presuppositions, our cherished beliefs.

Because Qoheleth is a MythBuster. He won't let us sit comfortably with all that we hold dear. He wants to shake us out of our complacency, to show up how foolishly we deceive ourselves.

Our **minds** are full of falsehoods, of myths; therefore our **lives** are full of stupidity.

Qoheleth will challenge us. He will unsettle us. He will make us angry.

But if we listen, he will leave us wiser, and better equipped to deal with the reality God has created.

d dialogue with the New Testament

Finally, we will put Qoheleth in dialogue with the writers of the New Testament. We know that all God's promises are met in Jesus, that God's self-revelation culminates in his Son.

There are things that Qoheleth does not know, for as he seeks to understand the world under the sun, he doesn't see Jesus. So we will have to hear what Jesus might say about Qoheleth's message, and see how that affects our application.

We're going to put this method into practice in just a moment, but in the meantime we're going to sing a song to focus ourselves on the character of the God who has spoken to us in the book of Ecclesiastes.

[SING HOLY, HOLY, HOLY]

3 All is *hebel*, so there is no gain (1:2–11)

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

The King James Version of the Bible is a majestic work of literature, and this is a very famous line.

The NIV puts it, "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

Vanity? Meaningless? What is Ecclesiastes getting at?

We're picking up at point 3 on your outlines: All is *hebel*, so there is no gain.

a all is *hebel* v 2

- **vapour, fleeting, insubstantial, elusive, unpredictable, uncontrollable, futile**

And the first thing you'll notice is that where the KJV has gone for 'vanity', emptiness, and the NIV has gone for 'meaningless', I've chickened out. I've stuck with the Hebrew, *hebel*.

The literal meaning of the word is vapour or a mist. [PPT] That's why, as the passage was read out for us before, I included a mist effect. I hope that the image of mistiness will stay with you, but the word 'meaningless' won't.

While I think the NIV is over all a good translation — and for the OT in particular it would be my translation of choice — I think they've got it badly wrong with this the word 'meaningless'.

Qoheleth is in fact at pains to point out that all is *not* meaningless. But it is *hebel*, it's a vapour.

What's a vapour like? It's fleeting. It doesn't hang around. That's the meaning that's on view in 11:10 [PPT]:

10 So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are *fleeting*.

Qoheleth sees a value in youth and vigour. They aren't *meaningless* for him, but they are short-lived.

So a vapour is fleeting. [PPT — BLANK]

It is also elusive. This can mean physically — something that you can't hold on to.

But it also means intellectually — something your mind can't grasp, something you can't understand.

The word can also be applied to abstract nouns, like wealth. Wealth, for Qoheleth, is *hebel*: it is fleeting, it is elusive, you can't hold onto it.

If you can't grasp something, you can't control it. So *hebel* can also mean uncontrollable or unpredictable.

hebel can also mean futile, or pointless. Qoheleth loves the expression 'chasing after the wind', and this is clearly *hebel*. You can't catch the wind, because it is elusive and insubstantial. Chasing after the wind is futile.

So, Qoheleth says, [PPT] all is *hebel* — vapour, fleeting, insubstantial, elusive, unpredictable, uncontrollable, futile.

He will justify this claim that all is *hebel* as he looks at a variety of things in the world. [PPT — BLANK]

In tonight's passage, he claims that human toil is *hebel*, for it does not result in any gain.

A gain is something left over, a surplus. You gain something when you get more out than you put in.

And 'toil' may mean employment, but I think in Ecclesiastes it has a broader meaning — something like 'the effort that you put into living'.

Read with me verse 3:

What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun?

What does a person gain? What more does a person get out of their business of living than they put in? That's the question that drives our passage for this evening, and we don't get the answer straight away.

True to form, Qoheleth uses observation to answer the question, "What does a person gain?"

And he observes two things: firstly, he observes how the world is. Secondly, he observes how humanity is in the world.

Let's look at those in turn.

b how the world is

▪ creation knows no gain v 5–7

So, firstly, how the world is. The first thing Qoheleth notices is that **creation** gains nothing from all **its** toil. Verse 5:

5 The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.

6 The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

7 All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.

Qoheleth observes three cycles in nature here: the sun that moves from east to west, the wind that blows from south to north, and the endless cycle of the waters.

Verse 8 in the NIV says, "All things are wearisome," but a better translation might be, "All things are hard at work."

In creation, all things have been tirelessly hard at work, but they haven't got anywhere. In creation, there is no gain. There is no surplus. Rather, these cycles endlessly repeat themselves. The sun hurries from where it sets only to rise again and to set.

▪ **because there is nothing new v 9–10**

In this creation, there is no gain because there is nothing new.
Verse 9:

9 What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

10 Is there anything of which one can say, Look! This is something new? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.

There is a kind of futility in the creation's activity. All is busy, but nothing new is produced. All is *hebel*.

On one level, we know this better now than Qoheleth did. We have the first and second laws of thermodynamics — energy cannot be created or destroyed, and all energy systems tend to chaos. If anything, as we look at the world, we see that it tends to loss rather than to gain.

And the New Testament holds a similar view of the futility of creation. Have a look with me at Romans 8: [PPT]

20 For the creation was subjected to **frustration**, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

The creation was subjected to frustration, to futility. The word Paul uses for 'frustration' here is the Greek version of *hebel* (ματαιότης). For Paul, as for Qoheleth, the creation is *hebel*.

Certainly, Paul knows, in verse 21, that there is hope that the creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay. But for the moment, we must face the brute fact that all is *hebel*.

[PPT — BLANK]

But what does it mean for us? Qoheleth is trying to save us, I think, from a life of misery and frustration. We tend to think that we can complete life with some kind of surplus. We think we can get more out than we put in.

At least, we seem to work like that. Australians — and particularly Sydneysiders — work longer than almost everyone in the OECD (www.oecd.org). Ask just about anyone how they're going, and the answer will come back, "Busy!"

What's all the activity for? It seems that we think it's going to amount to something.

But Qoheleth's point is simply that the world isn't like that. The world is not set up for us to gain anything from it. That's not what the world is for, and that's not what work is for.

We must see the futility of seeking to gain anything through toil.

So that's what the world is like, according to Qoheleth. What about humanity in the world?

c how humanity is in the world

- **no lasting impact v 4**

When Qoheleth looks at humanity in the world, he notices that human lives have no lasting impact.

Have a look with me at verse 4:

4 Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

There is a contrast here between human generations — which are fleeting — and the stable creation. However many generations come and go, they have no lasting impact on the cycles of creation.

However much we toil, we cannot make our lives secure. We cannot guarantee any gain in a world that is oblivious to our brief lives.

- **because we can't control the world; cf. Luke 12:22–26; James 4:13–16**

The world continues on its way, and we can have no lasting impact, because we simply can't control the world.

For us, we certainly have a better understanding of the inner workings of creation than Qoheleth had. We know, for example, that the earth **rotates**, creating the impression of the sun rising and setting.

What's more, we have a far more sophisticated meteorology.

But for all our understanding, we are no more in control of our world.

We can never have such control over our world that we might prevent the tremors that send tsunamis across that sea that never fills up. We cannot be assured of stopping asteroid impacts that might see the sun set on humanity forever.

Qoheleth sees that the wind comes and goes; and generations come and go. The wind gains nothing; the generations gain nothing.ⁱ

And Jesus says something very similar.

Jesus pricks the bubble of our belief that we are in control of our lives. He queries the busyness of human toil. Read with me from Luke 12:

24 Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!

25 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

26 Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

Jesus mocks the human tendency to feel in control. I love verses 25–26 there — Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? 26 Since you cannot do this very little thing...

Determining life and death lies far beyond our control, and yet, for God, the creator of the universe, this is a very little thing.

James, Jesus's brother, echoes this sentiment when he writes:

[PPT]

4:13 Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money."

14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist (ἀτμίς) that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

15 Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

16 As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.

Both of these passages urge us to face the reality that we are not in control.

It is God, the creator, who is in control.

[PPT — BLANK]

5 Busted!

Now I think that in this passage Qoheleth is doing some serious MythBusting for us.

Perhaps more than in any other period of history, we today need to hear the message that our toil shall know no gain, and we are not in control of our lives.

As I've been reflecting on this passage, it's occurred to me that our whole culture gently lulls us into a state where we believe that we can determine our destiny.

Some people, like Anthony Robbins, [PPT] say it in so many words.

But Qoheleth tells us it isn't so. [PPT] He has a way of dealing with this truth, and we'll look at that next week. But for now, it's worth being unsettled as we dwell on the fact that all is indeed *hebel*.

[PPT — BLANK]

a your toil knows no gain

The world is unpredictable, and creation's cycles continue on oblivious to the passing generations. In such a world, we can secure no advantage, no gain. That's simply not the way the world is set up.

b you are not in control

And ultimately we cannot control the world. The evidence of our senses should confirm what God is saying. We do our best to cocoon ourselves away from reality, but it keeps making its presence felt.

Our television shows tell us that if someone's sick, they'll be okay if you can just get them to hospital.

The British Medical Journal reported in 2000 that "In Australia, medical error results in as many as 18,000 unnecessary deaths, and more than 50,000 patients become disabled every year."

So, every year in Australia, 18,000 people die and 50,000 are somehow disabled *because* they see a doctor. And that's not to mention those who get to hospital and can't be healed.

You are not in control.

We have debates about so-called unwanted teenage pregnancy, and whether teenagers should be allowed to use RU486, while one in six Australian couples knows the agony of infertility. (Fertility Society of Australia — fsa.au.com)

You are not in control.

Financial companies and indeed our Federal Treasurer offer us security and an endless creation of wealth, but the Australian Government Productivity Commission tells us that in any given year, one in twelve Australian businesses will cease trade (<http://www.pc.gov.au/research/staffres/bfacaap/index.html>). Qintex. HIH. OneTel. Ansett.

You are not in control.

While we continue to believe the myth that we are in control, we shall fail to live rightly in God's world. And when calamity inevitably strikes, when reality shakes us out of our false sense of security, we won't know how to deal with it.

Qoheleth's message is not immediately appealing. I told you he's an acquired taste. But it is only when we accept Qoheleth's more realistic appraisal of the world that we shall stop being devoted to futile toil. He can teach us how best to live our brief lives.

More on that next week.

For now, hear the unsettling words of Qoheleth: The merest vapour, but a fleeting vapour. All is vapour.

Let's pray.

Our great God, our creator and our judge, we pray that you will help us to heed your word. Please help us to take stock of the way the world is. Please help us to recognize that all the effort we put into living cannot give us security in this world. As we read the Scriptures, please teach us how to live in your world. Amen.

▪ **i no memory v 11**

Indeed, the generations will not even be remembered.

Verse 11:

11 There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow.

The futility of the creation and human toil are highlighted by the fact that there will be no memory of them.

My grandfather fought in WWII, and about five years ago, he suddenly became interested in keeping in contact with surviving members of his unit.

Some of his descendants, including me, have marched in the ANZAC Day parade in recent years. Afterwards, the surviving members of the unit meet for lunch at Penshurst RSL. There were six former soldiers at the luncheon this year, out of the eighteen who are still alive.

Five members of the unit died in the last 12 months. They're listed here, and it says at the bottom of the page, "We remember you, and you will not be forgotten."

It's a fine sentiment, and it echoes the Ode to the Fallen:

"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them."

Lest we forget.

Now, I stand in awe of the sacrifice those men and women made. The members of my grandfather's unit as young men did something far nobler, far braver, far more selfless, than I could ever imagine doing.

Lest we forget.

But in a way, we've already forgotten, haven't we? The world has moved on. The former enemies are now our allies, but new conflicts rage on.

In the last 60 years, Australia has committed troops to questionable causes, making a mockery of the values that generation died to defend.

The word 'mateship' has become jingoistic, and is smeared now with the insincerity of manipulative politicians.

I hope that my grandparents are still alive should we have any children, but I doubt that our children will remember them.

If even the great feats of the generation of WWII are fading in memory, how foolish it is for us to think that we shall be remembered.

All is *hebel*.