

Managing life's micro-significances
By Hannah Hathaway

In this complex world, it is difficult to know exactly what “living a good life” means. In the Bible, there are a few books, called “wisdom literature,” that specifically explore how to live a good life from the premise that the world belongs to God. In one of these books, Ecclesiastes, the author offers three key examples to illustrate that life is meaningless. Although dark, these examples are used to help the reader understand just what it means to live a good life.

If you think wisdom will bring you happiness, think again, because “all is vanity” (NRSV Eccl 1:2). In the book of Ecclesiastes, we are introduced to a sharp, critical narrator who discusses three things that highlight how meaningless life is.

The first theme that is brought up is the race toward time, which is presented in Ecclesiastes 1:4: “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever” (Eccl. 1:4). The earth was created long before us, and will continue to move well after each and every single one of us is dead and gone. Our entire existence is just a blink in time.

The second theme that the critic explores is that death is inevitable for all; he says that “this is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead” (Eccl. 9:3). Humans face the same fate regardless of whether or not they give sacrifices to God – death.

Finally, the third theme the critic explores is the unpredictability of life. This theme is explored in Ecclesiastes 9:11 when the author writes, “. . . the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all” (Eccl. 9:11 2nd the). No one can predict the future and the only one who truly knows our fate is God.

To rise above the temptation to look at these themes as disturbing or dark, we turn to the word ‘hebel.’ Looking at its literal meaning, ‘hebel’ means ‘vapor,’ which gives the sense that something is fleeting and without substance. Similar to smoke, “life is beautiful and mysterious, takes on many shapes but is difficult to grasp and when you’re stuck in the middle, it is difficult to see clearly” (The Bible Project).

The narrator of Ecclesiastes isn’t telling the readers that life is meaningless, but that life can be difficult to grasp if we try too hard. Since life is like vapor, we should stop trying to control it, and instead learn to love things with an open hand.

We should focus our attention on the things we can control: actions, thoughts, and words. Since no one can anticipate the events of the future, we should strive to be grateful for every moment. Learn to enjoy the little moments; even if life doesn’t make sense, it has a lot of meaning.

Rather than looking at the book of Ecclesiastes with a sense of despair, we can choose to recognize its message that Life is always acting independently of the human experience.

Life is “not found in the macro-assumptions one holds, but in the way one manages life’s micro-significances. The little things count the most to make life full and meaningful” (Wharton 1999, 176).

There are going to be times when we fall into a pit of despair. However, the only time that everything is gone is when we choose not to look for the bright sun on a cloudy day. It is in moments of darkness that we can make the powerful choice to still be grateful. This sense of gratitude and humility comes when we understand that our lives are being taken care of by something more extraordinary than ourselves.

Through fearing the Lord — respecting His wisdom and ever-presence — we humble ourselves to let a clearer sense of our expression of God and His wisdom lead us into a good life.