

### **Wednesday, March 5: Of Dust and Nations (Ash Wednesday)**

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<https://open.spotify.com/track/0heP46gYaxV6jR8fn6Q3Bg>

*Merest breath, said Qohelet, merest breath. All is mere breath.*

This is Robert Alter's rendering of the opening words of the book of Ecclesiastes. More familiar translations, like the King James Version of the Bible, translate it as "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, all is vanity." Other translations like the Common English Bible, trying to get close to the overall sense, render it as "Perfectly pointless, says the Teacher, perfectly pointless. Everything is perfectly pointless." "Qohelet" comes from the Hebrew word "to assemble," and it translates to something like "the one who assembles." Hence, the choices about "teacher" or "preacher" in many translations. Alter, as with most scholars, just transliterate the Hebrew and refer to the teacher/preacher as "Qohelet."

Alter's translation is my favorite because he gets close to both the meaning of the words themselves as well as the overall sense they convey. The Hebrew words "havel havalim," in which the same word is basically repeated, signals an "extreme case." This is why we see translations like "vanity of vanities" or "perfectly pointless." The word "havel" comes from the word for "vapor." Therefore, he translates it as "merest breath." Imagine the vapor that escapes your mouth on a cold day. You see it for just a moment before it floats away and disappears. So also go the lives of humans, says Qohelet.

Besides chapter 3's meditation on there being a "season" for "and a time for every matter under the heavens" (3:1) at funerals or "two are better than one..." (4:12) at weddings, we don't hear much from Qohelet. That is probably because his realist, at times almost sardonic, take on the lives and experiences of humans doesn't at first glance give us the message of hope we are hoping for when we open the scriptures. Qohelet has essentially tried every way of living he can think of, applying his "mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven" (1:12). After trying it all out, what he decides, as the saying goes, is that there is nothing new under the sun, that all of it is "merest breath," because we are all headed to the same place—the grave.

The song "Of Dust and Nations" by Thrice takes up a similar theme to Qohelet using the themes of sand and dust. Thrice's singer Dustine Kensrue sings:

*The towers that shoulder your pride  
The words you've written in stone  
Sand will cover them, sand will cover you  
The streets that suffer your name  
Your very flesh and your bones*

From the view of centuries, the song reminds us that as much emphasis and importance as we place on nations and national identity, all of it is passing away. Kensrue sings, “step out from time/see the dust of nations.” Sand will eventually cover it all, and all that will be left is dust. In other words, it is “mere breath.” Kensrue zooms in to remind us “your very flesh and bones” will be covered by sand and dust will be what is left. In many ways this echoes the words we hear on Ash Wednesday as the ashes are traced on our foreheads, “You are dust and to dust you shall return.”

If there is ever a place where Qohelet’s outlook emerges, it is Ash Wednesday and the journey of Lent. In it, we are reminded of our mortality as well as our inclination to sin. We are called to “Repent, and believe the Gospel.” As good as we believe we are, as important as we make ourselves, as enduring as we hope our lives and the life of our nation will be, we are dust and to dust we shall return. There is nothing new under the sun, both in our goodness and in our sinfulness. It is only when we are honest about it, when we allow the Spirit of God to search us and tell us a story about ourselves that is true, can we truly open ourselves to the work of God within us.

When “Of Dust and Nations” moves to the chorus, Kensrue invites us to

*Put your faith, in more than steel  
Don't store your treasures up with moth and rust  
Where thieves break in and steal  
Pull the fangs from out your heel  
We live in but a shadow of the real*

“Put your faith, in more than steel,” reminds me of Jesus’ words when one of the disciples’ cuts off the slave of the high priest’s ear, and others ask, “Lord, should we strike with the sword?” Jesus heals the slave and says, “No more of this!” (Luke 22:49-51). The early church understood these words of Jesus to be an explicit call to nonviolence, that reverberated in the body of Christ as persecuted Christians were led to death by Roman authorities. Their faith was in more than the violence that nations put their faith in to try to give themselves power and security.

The next part of the verse calls to mind Jesus’ words to not “build up treasures” for ourselves in this life (Matthew 6:19-21), and to “pull the fangs from out your heel” is to remember the curse in Genesis, where God says about the man and the snake, “he will crush your head and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). This is a curse from which we are being healed in Jesus Christ. However, since the “wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23,) Qohelet’s reminder that our lives are “merest breath” continues to echo in our minds. Similarly, Kensrue reminds us,

*It will all be undone, and nothing built under the sun  
Will ever stand before the endless march of sand*

Everything is “merest breath.” Everything we build will eventually crumble. But at this point in Thrice’s song, we are returned to the chorus. “So put your faith, in more than steel/don’t store your treasures up with moat and rust.” Our faith teaches us that to realize that everything will pass away is not a sign that we should lose hope, but instead that if our faith is in our Eternal God whose love is enfleshed in Jesus Christ, then we need not despair. Instead, we hear the one from the throne say “See, I am making all things new!” (Revelation 21:5).

And what of Qohelet? He gives us clear, solid, realistic counsel. There is no pie in the sky, no Pollyanna in Qohelet. This is his wisdom: “This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of life God gives us, for this our lot” (5:18). His final verdict is that because all of life is “merest breath,” we should try to live our lives well, we should faithfully do the work given to us, that we should care for those who are oppressed, that we should enjoy ourselves within reason, and at the end of the day realize that the part we play in history is a very small one.

On this side of the cross we know that we can do this because our past, present, and future is found in Jesus Christ. While we may spend our lives searching for meaning, we ultimately find it in the Alpha and the Omega, Jesus Christ, the beginning and the end. We need not fear the ephemerality of our lives because there is an eternity to be found in God. As the “Hymn of Promise” says,

*In our end is our beginning,  
In our time, infinity  
In our doubt, there is believing,  
In our life, eternity,  
In our death, a resurrection,  
At the last, a victory,  
Unrevealed until its season,  
Something God alone can see.*