

Can I Find Meaning?
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Ecclesiastes 1&2

If a friend asked you “What makes your life meaningful?” what are some ways you could respond? “My life is meaningful because...”

The book of Ecclesiastes is one of five WISDOM books of the Bible [Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon]. *“WISDOM LITERATURE A genre of writing featuring wise sayings and astute observations.”* Basically, how to live life. *“Biblical Wisdom literature is unique, teaching that the fear of God is the foundation of true wisdom (Prov. 9:10) and ultimate success.”* [Holman Illustr. Bible Dictionary]

Traditionally it's believed that SOLOMON wrote Ecclesiastes. Technically, the author is UNKNOWN. Some scholars argue that the language brings Solomon's authorship into question. For our purposes, we're safe to “go with” Solomon.

Solomon was unlike any man before or since. He had wisdom, straight from God...the wisest man who ever lived. He had power as king. He had ANYTHING money could buy and MORE OF IT than anyone had ever amassed. Yet, as he was growing older he felt life was “meaningless!” Like “chasing after the wind.”

If someone like Solomon says life is meaningless...what's the point for you and me? There IS a point. Solomon DID come to a conclusion. And we won't wait until the end of August to hear it, we'll know it by the end of this lesson!

So, Solomon set out for ANSWERS. There MUST be meaning and purpose in life! There would be no one better to search for it than a man with almost limitless wisdom, power, and resources with which to experiment.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-4

- 1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
- 2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
- 3 What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?
- 4 A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.

- Verse 1: **What does Solomon call himself?** Communicator, philosopher, collector of information.
- The word “vanity” here is not looking in the mirror at how attractive you are.

- It translates three ways in this book: Life is a vapor or it's empty; Life is meaningless; and Life is an enigma...a riddle you can't solve.
- **Why do you think he repeats that word several times in a row in one sentence?**
- He doesn't just repeat it in these verses. He uses the word 39 times in this book.
- **Verse 3: What is he asking?**
- Another term he uses a lot, "under the sun." He'll use that one 29 times. It just means here on this broken planet we call earth.
- Verse 4: People are born and then they die and it's like they were never here.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-14

12 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

- **Verse 13: What method did Solomon employ to find the meaning of life?**
- **How did it go? (last part of 13 and all of 14).**
- J. Vernon McGee had an interesting take on this. We know God gave Solomon wisdom to rule the nation. McGee believed God gave him political and leadership wisdom, but that his speech and conduct in this book indicate he was lacking SPIRITUAL WISDOM.
- The intellectual believes they can THINK their way to the meaning of life.
- Verse 15 sums up the problem of trying to discern the meaning of life by WISDOM or KNOWLEDGE.

15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

Ecclesiastes 7:13 (ESV) Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?

The Adrian Rogers Legacy Bible states:

"[It] may surprise you, but God, in His infinite wisdom, makes life a mystery."

- **Question: Why do you think God would make life a mystery for us?**

Ecclesiastes 2:1-3

2 I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" 3 I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

- If Solomon couldn't think his way to meaning in life, he tried to ENJOY his way there.
- **Let's glance at 2:4-9. What are the PLEASURES in which Solomon indulged?**
- Look at verses 10 and 11:

Ecclesiastes 2:10–11 (ESV)

10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

- So many times, in a transparent moment, we hear a celebrity say, *“I had fame, money, power, but inside I felt...” (What?)*
- So Solomon tried another approach. “If knowledge doesn’t give me meaning, and pleasure doesn’t give me meaning, maybe I can get it with a ‘good conduct’ medal!”

12 So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. 13 Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. 14 The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.

- Solomon said I compared being wise to “madness and folly.” **What do we call someone who lives in “madness and folly”?**
- He tried to find the meaning of life by living in a wise, reasonable manner.
- **Verse 14: What was Solomon’s conclusion? What does he mean? (vv.15-17)**
- Seeking the meaning in life by HUMAN WISDOM not only fails, it makes us miserable.
- Consider two old sayings: *“Ignorance is bliss.”* and, *“A wise man is never happy.”*
- **How do those sayings speak to trying to find meaning by human wisdom?**

Warren Wiersbe points out:

Those who go through life living on explanations will always be unhappy for at least two reasons. First, this side of heaven, there are no explanations for some things that happen, and God is not obligated to explain them anyway. (In fact, if He did, we might not understand them!) Second, God has ordained that His people live by promises and not by explanations, by faith and not by sight. “Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

So far, in everything Solomon has tried to find meaning in life, what is missing? We said earlier, the word “vanity” (or meaningless) is mentioned 31 times in the ESV version of Ecclesiastes. God is mentioned 39 times. What does that tell you?

Look at verses 24-26, finally we begin to see a glimmer of hope. We CAN enjoy life if we consider it a “gift” from the hand of God.

24 There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, 25 for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 26 For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of

gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Oh, I promised to give you the end of the story and not keep you in suspense. Turn to the last chapter of Ecclesiastes...chapter 12...and the last two verses 13 & 14:

Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 (ESV)

13 The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

So, What's the Takeaway?

The astronomer Carl Sagan (who doesn't believe in God) said:

"In all our searching, the only thing we've found that makes the emptiness bearable is each other."

- HE GOT IT WRONG! Having others is a rich part of life, but, as Solomon found out, nothing works without God.
- Apart from God there is NO MEANING in life.
- And apart from Him there is NO ENJOYMENT.
- No matter how much you accumulate...money, power, even knowledge...life apart from God is FUTILE...meaningless....EMPTY.
- Do you sometimes feel that life is meaningless? Like "chasing after the wind?"
- It's clear we've been given this book of the Bible to learn from Solomon's experiment.
- These next few weeks, will you join Solomon and all of us on this journey through the book of Ecclesiastes to discover GOD'S WISDOM about the meaning of life?