

meaning(less)



A Study in Ecclesiastes Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 (Chapters 1 and 2)

I do feel some connection and affinity with Solomon. I'm now looking back through the same tunnel of time that he was staring through. And he didn't have it all figured out either. I believe this book we call Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon, although he never directly says so. He refers to himself as "the preacher," or "the quester" or we might even say, "the pundit."

Solomon was one of the most powerful monarchs of his day. He led Israel over 40 years in peace. He was also the smartest guy in the room. Any room. He could talk politics, religion, finance, agriculture, horticulture, or architecture. People would literally travel from around the world just to get a seat at one of his lectures. He had more money than Jeff Bezos and was smarter than Elon Musk. He was literally sitting on top of the world...and found it empty. Vain. Boring.

Jan Krakauer was a journalist who scaled the summit of Mt Everest. Twelve of his fellow climbers died in the incident. He wrote in his book *Into Thin Air* about standing "with one foot in China and the other in Nepal." He continued, "I cleared away the ice from my oxygen mask, hunched a shoulder against the wind, and stared down at the vast wasteland of Tibet. I had fantasized about this moment for months, the emotional release that would come. But now that it was finally here, I couldn't muster the energy to care. I snapped four quick photos...then turned to begin my descent. All told, I spent less than five minutes standing on the roof of the world." (Krakauer, *Into Thin Air*)

Solomon could identify with the climber's disappointment. While he had scaled no mountain peak, he stared into the extent of his accomplishments and said, "It's empty."

He's taking us on a journey through the paths of life he has taken. It is, mostly, one dead end after another. It's not an easy book to read and study, although there are a couple of high points we hit along the way. His words have become lyrics to popular songs, "Turn, Turn, Turn" by the Byrd's. Google it. His thoughts make this book the most-quoted Biblical book by atheists. Most of us wouldn't buy a coffee mug with the inscription "a time to be born and a time to die" on it.

But I think, of any study you can do, this book takes you into the mind of those around us trying to live life without reference to God. We read the phrase "under the sun" thirty times in twelve chapters. I heard a line from a very popular new TV show that said, "We are now in heaven. And in hell. They happen simultaneously. And the land is God." Life under the sun.

That is where the majority of our post-Christian culture lives today. "Under the sun" means "assuming there is nothing but what we can see and experience with our senses." That's where the dominant philosophy of our day takes us. As Ephesians has it, they are "without hope and without God in the world."

We have become a people who believe the extent of existence today is set by the limits of a universe that we can see, study empirically, and explore. Nothing of consequence exists beyond the visible, material world. Nothing eternal. No God Who created all things. As Carl Sagan, a proponent of today's philosophical naturalism put it, "The Universe is all there is." (In Sagan's last book, Contact, he did conclude that there is a majestic artistry to the universe. There must be an artist behind it). For many who live in such a system there is no room made for invisible, all-knowing, all-powerful God.

If that's true, then the words of Qoholoth are exactly right. At the end of the day, there is no meaning to it all. There is no reason for existence, except to exist. Stephen Hawking, one of the most brilliant cosmologists who ever lived, concluded that we have pretty much understood and can explain most things scientifically or mathematically, except why there is existence!

Solomon's conclusion in the opening soliloquy of Ecclesiastes is "everything is boring. Everything is the same. Nothing makes sense." "The wind blows on the same circuits, the streams run to the same ultimate end into an ocean that's never full. Every day is the same. The sun rises, and sets. We punch in, we punch out. The course of life, the circle of the sun, the circuit of the winds, the cycle of the water. What's the point? "There's nothing new under the sun."

SOLOMON'S QUEST FOR MEANING

Now lest we think that the insight of these words really has no bearing on our lives, let me remind us of something. You see, I believe this is THE most important question we can answer for ourselves today. Without reference to God, does anything make sense?

That's exactly where "the preacher" found himself at the end of his life. Looking back over it all, he concluded, "It's empty. Vanity. Smoke and mirrors." I read a copy of an anonymous suicide note written by a bright young college student. Partly it said:

To anyone in the world who cares. Who am I? Why am I alive? Life has become stupid and purposeless. Nothing makes sense anymore. The questions I had when I came to college are still unanswered and now, I am convinced there are no answers.

Our young people today, bright, educated, talented...are walking into the abyss of suicide because it's preferable to living the life they know... a life of guilt, and frustration, and despair, and futility. This isn't a theoretical, abstract question. It's life and death.

And it's not just the young affected. Ernest Hemingway, the famous writer who lived a Solomonic-like life...traveling, fishing for Tarpon in Florida, hunting wild game around the world... turned a rifle on himself. After all the words he had written, his suicide note was chillingly simple: "Life is just one d*** thing after another."

Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Life reports on a survey conducted by Dr Hugh Moorland, a philosophy professor from Northeastern Illinois University, in which he polled 250 intellectuals, philosophers, scientists, and writers and asked them, "What is the meaning of life?" Most wrote back with answers which many admitted later they just made up. Some were honest enough to write him back and ask if HE had discovered the purpose of life!

THE LONG AND WINDING ROADS

If Solomon had a theme song, I would think it might be something like the Rolling Stones "Can't Get No Satisfaction. And I tried, and I tried, and I tried, and I tried...I can't get no..." Mick Jagger is now 78, in his fifth marriage and the father of 8, but he's still singing it. He's the most prominent rock musician in the world, maybe in history. He has more money than he'll ever find time to spend (well, except on alimony). But it hasn't brought satisfaction.

Unrivaled education (1:12-18)

Solomon sat on top of the world. One of the most, if not the most educated man of his day. His intention was to figure this problem out. (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18). But he found accumulating knowledge...education....to be a dead end. Listen, if you think your college degree or your high school diploma is going to be the answer to all your problems, you need to pay attention here. It won't be. Some of the world's greatest evil has been committed by brilliantly educated people. There's no guarantee education will make you a better person. TS Elliot said, "All of knowledge just brings us nearer to our ignorance." That was Solomon's conclusion.

Unbridled pleasure. (2:1-3, 24-25).

I drove past a bar called "The Muse" in Mandarin on Friday and Saturday nights this week. Both nights, the parking lot was full to overflowing, with cars lined up to find parking. If you follow any one of those cars home, ask the person "Are you happy now? Does life make sense now?" I have a strong suspicion their answer will be a resounding "no."

If you had virtually limitless resources, could I ask you a question? What would YOU do to make yourself happy? Your answer speaks volumes about your soul.

Unlimited accumulation. (2:7-11). In a survey called the World Values Survey, the poorest countries in the world consistently score highest on the happiness index. As boxer Joe Lewis used to say, "I don't like money actually. But it calms my nerves." Maybe. But it won't make you happy. And it's the people who have it who say so.

Unending work. (2:4-6, 17-23). That did not satisfy him. It keeps you busy. It won't satisfy you. So many people lose themselves in their daily work, thinking that the next level, the next step, the next raise will make it feel it makes sense. Solomon testifies that it never does.

AN UNSATISFACTORY CONCLUSION

So, are you thoroughly depressed yet? Some of you aren't because you're on the right path. You know this is your Father's world, and it's not the final stopping point. But so many don't know that.

If you are living just for what you can see and feel and taste and touch and put in your pocket, believing these things will make you ultimately satisfied, you are headed for a great disappointment.

In other words, without God it's all meaningless. What's the point? But if God is in the center of your career, your relationships, your finances, your joy then suddenly the lights come on.

Most of the things Solomon was doing are things we couldn't criticize. But anything we try to do...leaving God out in the process...will lead to emptiness. And anything we do for His glory and for His honor, will fill us with meaning and satisfaction beyond belief.

So how do you want to live? Do you really want the epitaph of your life to be, "I Never Got Any Satisfaction?" Or do you want it to be, "All That Satisfies My Soul is Jesus?"

I have wondered through the years why Ecclesiastes attracts me so much. But I think I've figured it out. When I made my decision for Jesus as a 20-year-old, I was coming out of a season of deep searching in my life. I was searching for meaning in all the wrong places, too.

I thought fulfilling my dream as a professional musician would do that. It didn't. I followed all the dead ends associated with our culture in the early and mid-70's. Nothing did it for me. At the end of the day, I came to a point of true despair in my life. Life had no meaning.

Then I met Jesus. I mean, met Him for real. I was hollow as a chocolate Easter bunny, and I had everything I thought I wanted. It wasn't what I wanted after all. The partying, the popularity, easy money. All of it meant nothing.

But when I walked out of the house after praying, repenting, and receiving Christ, things suddenly began to make sense! Jesus is better. "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" the Bible says.

Your heart...and your life...will be full if you know Him.