

Does Life Have a Purpose?

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Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture readings are from the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 1, verses 1 through 18, chapter 3, verses 10 and 11, and chapter 12, verses 13 and 14, as printed in the liturgy.

A reading from the book of Ecclesiastes. The words of the teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem. Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher.

Utterly meaningless, everything is meaningless. What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun sets and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north. Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

[1 : 20] All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. And to the place the streams come from, there they return again. All things are wearisome, more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again. What has been done will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun.

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. No one remembers the former generations.

And even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them. I, the teacher, was king over Israel and Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens.

What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind. I have seen all the things that are done under the sun. All of them are meaningless. A chasing after the wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened.

[2 : 23] What is lacking cannot be counted. I said to myself, look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me. I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.

Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly. But I learned that this too is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow.

The more knowledge, the more grief. I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart.

Yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. Now all has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments.

For this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. This is the word of the Lord.

[3 : 24] Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church. It is so good to see you all. And as Andrew said, especially if you are new with us for this Explore God journey, if you've come along with a friend or received an invitation, we're delighted you're here.

We do hope that you've already been warmly welcomed. And that you know this is a place where you can belong, whatever your spiritual or cultural background, wherever you may be on that spectrum of belief or unbelief.

And we're excited to engage with you, explore God with you, and learn from you. And if you're part of our Christ Church family, we just encourage you to take this. The reason we gave it to you today is so you can give it to somebody else and invite them, a friend, a neighbor, a co-worker along on

this journey with us.

We have very busy lives, don't we? And there's so many questions that we ask ourselves every day.

Like tomorrow morning, we're going to wake up and say, what should I wear? And what's the weather going to be like today? And what's happening at work? And how am I going to fit it all in? [4 : 34] But there's also these questions that are bigger, right? Like, why am I here? And where are we heading? And is this it? And is there more to life than this?

These are life's big questions, but we rarely have the time to think through them properly. And so that's why we're going to think seriously over the next seven weeks about these big questions of life.

And we're going to begin today with this question, does life have a purpose? What's the meaning of life? And in the coming weeks, we're going to explore other questions. Is there a God? Why does God allow pain and suffering?

Is Christianity too narrow? Is Jesus really God? Is the Bible reliable? And can I know God personally? And if you're like me, you hear those questions, you're like, well, I have like 20 more questions. And so, as Andrew said, we do invite you to our Q&A; time at the end.

And go easy on me, though, because it's kind of new for us. When asked whether people think about the meaning and purpose of life, nearly three-quarters of people across the globe say that they do think about that question often or sometimes.

[5 : 43] And if you were to ask me, is there a book of the Bible that really devotes itself to this search for purpose and for meaning? And particularly that takes seriously the possibility that life may not have a meaning and that life may not have an actual purpose.

And a book that explores the consequences of that possibility. I would have to say it's the book of Ecclesiastes that you just heard. And I leaned to my daughter as I was being read.

I said, did you even know this is in the Bible? She's like, no, I've never heard this in my life.

Meaningless, meaningless. Everything is meaningless. How can that possibly be meaningful? And who in the world is this teacher?

Well, this teacher in this book, he's a parent who's trying to prepare his kids to live wisely. And so he shares with his children his own agonizing struggle between skepticism and faith.

He says, look, I've already been there and done that. And let me share with you this agonizing struggle that I've had between the absurdity of my existence and the fear of God.

[6 : 59] Skepticism and faith. And what we find in this book is full of skeptical questions. And this teacher is really pushing his kids and he's pushing us to the logical conclusion of our positions.

He's trying to lay bare the foundations of our life and explore the boundaries of our thought. And he says to us relentlessly, well, why do you believe that?

And do you know what that means? And have you thought about the implications of your beliefs? And this is a book that it does in the end, as you just heard, it affirms a faith in a generous God.

But it does so first by pointing us to the grim alternative of life without God. And it really asks us to consider that. What is life without God all about?

Before it tells us what the purpose and the meaning of life is, it seeks to clarify for us what the meaning and purpose of life is not. And so that's what we're going to explore a little bit together.

[8 : 04] Okay? You ready? I want to talk about the meaning crisis under the sun. The problem with self-made meanings and meaning above and beyond the sun.

Those three things. The meaning crisis under the sun. The problem with self-made meanings and meaning above and beyond the sun. And I want to start by talking about the meaning crisis under the sun.

And I want you to hear again these words in verse 3. What does anyone gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? And then he says in verse 14, I have seen all the things that are done under the sun.

All of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. And this is a key word in this book is life under the sun. He uses that phrase 29 times. Just repeats it over and over.

And in that, the teacher is basically saying, let's do this. This is a thought experiment. Let's assume that nature, that material reality is all there is. And let's bracket out for a moment anything that could possibly be above and beyond the sun.

[9 : 07] Let's just say that there's no God who created you. No one who's sustaining you. No lawgiver, no judge, no heaven, no eternity, no afterlife. And in this framework of all that's done merely under the sun, he asks some questions.

What do we gain and profit from all of our labors? And when all is said and done, what are we going to have to show for it all? What will we have accomplished? What difference will we have made in this life under the sun?

And then his answer to that question 37 times throughout this book, it's just relentless, he says everything, when you consider life only under the sun, everything is utterly meaningless.

Everything he says literally in Hebrew, he says it's vapor. It's a puff of air, it's just a breath that's here and then it's gone. And that's the theme of this whole book.

And really the teacher's first goal is to get his kids and to get us to be realists. And to face the fact that life under the sun is vaporous and it's despairing and it's meaningless and it's absurd.

[10 : 21] And in many ways, I can't think of a more contemporary book that if this teacher were here today, he'd be critiquing the default belief system that's emerging in our culture, which is secularism.

And I think it's captured very well in this article by James Wood in The New Yorker. James Wood is a Harvard professor and he's a professor of English, he's a literary critic and he's writing, really quoting a friend of his who's an analytical philosopher and a convinced atheist who wakes up regularly in the middle of the night haunted by a visceral angst.

And he's quoting his friend and he says, how can it be that this world is the result of an accidental big bang? How could there be no design, no metaphysical purpose?

Can it be that every life beginning with my own, my husband's, my child's, and spreading outward is cosmically irrelevant? And then Wood, who's a secular man himself, he admits that as one gets older and parents and peers begin to die and the obituaries and the newspaper are no longer missives from a faraway place, but local letters and one's own projects seem ever more pointless and ephemeral.

Such moments of terror and incomprehension seem more frequent and more piercing and I find as likely to arise in the middle of the day as in the night.

[11 : 49] It's a great article, it's called, Is This All There Is, Secularism and Its Discontents? And I want us to consider for a moment the belief structure of strict secularism.

And the beliefs of secularism are basically these, that people are only physical entities without souls, that when your loved ones die they cease to exist, that our sensations of love and beauty are just neurochemical events, and that there is no right or wrong outside of what we choose in our minds.

And that secularism tends to really flatten and reduce human life so that as one author puts it, all of our getting and spending amount to nothing more than fidgeting while we wait for death.

Now maybe you feel that way. Many, many people in our lives feel that way. They have good jobs, they have family, they have friends, they have resources to live in a materially comfortable way, but they say that their lives feel meaningless.

And maybe that's you. I'm not really sure what all this activity that I'm doing is being done for. All this making and getting, I don't know if it actually matters, if it makes a difference, if it's accomplishing anything beyond itself.

[13 : 13] And I'm not quite sure if I have an overall purpose for living or making a difference by serving some good beyond myself. Maybe that resonates with some of us.

And yet, you know, many of us feel conflicted. We feel conflicted because we intuit, either faintly or quite strongly, that human beings and human loves and human aspirations can't be reduced down to mere material reality, that there's something more than just our chemistry and our genes and our bodies, right?

So I think this teacher and his under-the-sun thesis is an incredibly relevant contemporary thing that speaks to this modern meaning-shaped whole at the center of our culture.

Right? And over the last century, we had many, many people writing. Chekhov, Kafka, Camus, Sartre, and they talked about this existential dread that sort of came over Western 20th century life and this sense of angst and despair and absurdity and the nausea that ensued.

And they basically said, we're all like Sisyphus, right? That Greek myth where there's that guy just rolling his rock up the hill only to see your rock come rolling back down at the end of the day.

[14:42] We're trying so hard to do good for the people we love and yet we know that that good doesn't last. We know that the people that we love don't last. As the philosopher Bertrand Russell argued about the secular view, he said that all of our human labor and love and genius is, quote, destined to extinction and the vast death of the solar system and that results henceforth in an unyielding despair.

And I think our teacher would agree. Our teacher's trying to help us live for a moment in that unyielding despair and he's begging this question, can purpose, can meaning for our lives be found only under the sun in this here and now reality?

Like material secularism suggests that we should try to do. And some people shrug at that and they say, well, whatever. You know, I'm not really looking for meaning.

If the universe is truly meaningless and indifferent, then why should we think that it ought not to be that way? In fact, maybe we should just celebrate meaninglessness and acknowledge that it's liberating, actually, to relinquish our expectation that there ought to be some kind of meaning with a capital M.

In fact, the result of there being no meaning is that now it's kind of great. We're free to determine for ourselves how we want to live and we're free to construct our own meanings, right?

[16:17] And this is the great crisis of meaning in our culture. Some people, modern people, grieving our meaninglessness and our loss of meaning. Postmodern people, gleefully celebrating that we have no more meaning and this sense that we're cosmically irrelevant and that we share no more meaning in common in our lives together has created quite a bit of confusion and conflict and chaos that I think we've seen increase, even, over the last five to ten years in our culture.

And I think our teacher gives us this incredibly haunting image that this crisis of meaning for us is like a chasing after the wind. We're trying desperately but unsuccessfully to grab hold of something that's slipping through our fingers.

You tracking with me on this crisis of meaning? You feel that in your life and in our culture? There's a crisis of meaning under the sun, our teacher says. But then he goes on and I want to explore the problem with self-made meanings because many secular people might respond to this and say, well, I have to insist that I actually do have a satisfying meaning in my life.

You know, I'm seeking to be a good parent. I'm serving a crucial political cause. I tutor underprivileged youth. I enjoy and promote great literature. And all this gives me great purpose and assurance that I'm doing some good beyond myself.

I'm serving some good higher than myself. And it's true that, you know, people can live with these smaller meanings and not feel tortured like Kafka and gloomy like Camus.

[18:01] And we should, you know, it's a good and admirable thing to find true purpose and meaning in ordinary tasks. But I want to suggest to you that there's a vast difference between assigned meanings on the one hand and inherent meaning on the other.

I want you to see and think about this difference between subjective meaning that you come up with and objective meaning that's just there whether you discover it or not.

Right? There's a difference between created meaning and discovered meaning. For example, you might determine, well, I'm going to live my life for political change. I'm going to live for influence in my vocational field.

I'm going to live for happiness in my family. And those might serve for you as energizing goals. But our teacher would say these kind of self-made, subjective, constructed meanings are actually quite thin and fragile and temporary.

And they don't really pass the rigorous test and really the withering test of our teacher because he would come to you and he would say, okay, great. You're living for a project that's larger than yourself.

[19:13] You're caring for your family. You're alleviating poverty. But what's the point of that? What difference does that make? And you say, well, I'm trying to make the world into a better place. But our teacher would keep boring down on you and say, but what's the point of that?

And you answer and he says, well, what's the point of that? And what's the point of that? And what's the point of that? And he says, if you say, if my meaning is attached to personal relationships, the teacher would say, well, all those people are going to die.

And if you say, well, my meaning is invested in future generations and making the future world a better place, he would say, but all that's going to pass away too. He says in verse four, generations

come and generations go.

And in verse 11, he says, there's no remembrance of people of old and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them. Within this secular vision of life under the sun, he says, your influence and your impact is in the grand view of things going to be quite negligible.

How many of us even remember the names of our great grandparents? Some of us can barely remember. Think about that for your own life. In 50 years, who is going to be talking about you? [20 : 28] If you leave a ton of money behind to an organization, maybe they named something after you. In 500 years though, are they going to be talking about you? Maybe if you ruled over an empire, we might be reading about you.

But 5,000 years from now, are we going to be talking about you and even remembering your name? Our teacher says, you know, you kind of have to tell yourself that your self-made meaning matters even though you know that the universe is going to cool down or collapse on itself and when it's dying, it's never going to care that you even existed.

And so you have to train yourself as a secular person not to ask these meta questions about the point of your life. You have to discipline yourself not to think about the ultimate outcome of all that we do, which in the secular view of things is sheer nothingness.

And you say, yeah, but I just put it all out of my mind and I try to focus on the meaning of this present moment, but that, what you just said is that you get your feeling of meaningfulness by a lack of rationality, that through a suppression of your thinking and reflection on the larger reality, you can kind of conjure up this feeling of meaningfulness.

And some of you say, well, gosh, okay, maybe humanism's kind of not the way to go. And some of you say, well, I kind of actually left this version of humanism behind and at some point I just embraced kind of a straight-up hedonism, right?

[22 : 02] Hedonism says, well, I'm not going to live anymore for other people. I'm now going to live for myself. And my main goal in life now is to just experience as much pleasure and as little pain as possible and hope that I die in my sleep.

Maybe you feel this way or maybe you know people that live this way, but our teacher would respond to that in verse 8 and say, well, all things are wearisome more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing nor the ear its fill of hearing. What makes you think, the teacher says, that your eyes or your ears or any other sense perception that's going to take in all those pleasure feelings are ever going to say, that's enough or I'm full.

It's never going to satisfy. We know that we can't get enough dopamine. The more dopamine hits you get, the more you have to go find. And the teacher of Ecclesiastes, if you keep reading this book, which I encourage you to do, he says in Ecclesiastes 2, I tried this.

I tried shearing myself with wine and I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

[23 : 16] I amassed silver and gold for myself and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, even a whole harem of women, the delights of a man's heart.

He says, I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. I refused my heart no pleasure. And yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I'd toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless. A chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun. In the secular vision of life, dopamine is not only not enough, but you have to remind yourself that none of the good things you feel have any meaning.

When you fall in love and you're attracted to that girl or that guy, it's just an accidental collision of atoms. Your response to her is only a psychic phosphorescence arising from the behavior of your genes and nothing more.

when you hear that beautiful music and you think to yourself, ah, there's such beauty and significance here, you have to tell yourself that's a pure illusion. That the only reason you like it is because your nervous system has been irrationally conditioned to like it.

[24 : 32] The same goes for hugging a child or watching a sunset or reading a book and you say, ah, this feels good. That's just electrochemical responses in your nerves.

And you cannot say, I'm just going to project my feeling of meaning onto this senseless universe. And you say, okay, well, this is why I'm not a humanist and it's why I'm no longer a hedonist.

It's why I became at one point an existentialist. And I said, well, okay, now I'm going to fight for justice. I'm going to fight against oppression. And with Dylan Thomas, I say, do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light. Yes, life is meaningless, but I'm going to rage against life and I'm going to rage against all that meaningless and I'm going to hope that I do something to put some wrongs in this world to right before I die.

And our teacher would say to you in verse 15, what is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted. It takes a certain level of narcissism to think that you finally are going, you've arrived to straighten everything in this crooked world out.

[25 : 50] And our teacher would say to you as well, where do you even get your standard for straightness and fullness by which you discern that the universe is crooked and lacking?

have I lost you completely? You would have to appeal to some authority above yourself and above this world to even say that something's wrong with this world.

And the teacher would say, how can you say that your origin is insignificant and your destiny is insignificant but while I'm alive I'm going to work for human rights and human justice as if somehow those things are significant?

You can't say that. How can you say that my origin is an accident, my destiny is to be annihilated but for right now we should all love our neighbors as ourselves.

Where did you get that? And is that even consistent with your vision? That actually takes an entire giant leap of religious faith and some kind of transcendent reality to say that human beings have some sort of inherent specialness or dignity that we should do something for them.

[26 : 59] But isn't it more consistent with the secular vision of reality to say the strong should devour the weak and might makes right?

That is actually the ethic that goes along with your metaphysic. And the teacher says in verse 18 he says, for with much wisdom comes much sorrow, the more knowledge the more grief.

He says, maybe you just haven't lived long enough because the more you live, the more you see, the more you know that all of these schemes, humanism, hedonism, existentialism, all the other isms, they've been tried in some form or fashion and they've been found wanting.

They fall apart. They come to nothing. They end, he says, in sorrow and in grief. And at some point, you know, some of you have said, okay, this is the worst sermon I have ever heard and I hate this book of the Bible.

But, and I get that, it's super depressing but we have to think about what the meaning of life and the purpose of life cannot be if we're going to discover what it actually is.

[28 : 17] And so we, if you agree that there's some sort of meaning crisis under the sun and if you agree that all these self-made meanings are quite thin and fragile and temporary and don't stand up to these tests, then I'd like for you to consider for these last few minutes a meaning above and beyond the sun.

Because our teacher says in the third chapter of this book, he says, I've seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He's made everything beautiful in its time.

He has also set eternity in the human heart yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. The teacher says your heart is telling you something if you'll listen very closely.

Your heart is telling you that there's something more to life than what's merely under the sun in the here and now material moment. Your heart is longing for justice and for the world to be put right.

Your heart is longing with a thirst for some hidden spring of spirituality and mystery and fullness and coherence that's beyond the space, time and matter continuum.

[29 : 26] Your heart is hungering for love and you know somewhere in your being that you're made for other people. And your heart is desiring beauty to stand at the top of that mountain to be on the edge of the ocean to peer into the eyes of your beloved and you know in your heart that all that justice and all that love and all that beauty and all that fullness is not meaningless.

You know that. These are signs that God has put in your heart pointing to eternity. And more than that God has put clues of himself into the world divine fingerprints everywhere that cause us to ask the question why is there something more than nothing?

When you think about the fine tuning of the universe the speed of light the gravitational constant these weak and strong nuclear forces and how all of that is precisely calibrated at one in a trillion trillion chance that the universe supports human life.

And you might say well that's not a proof that God exists but I would say it certainly seems to be a cosmic welcome mat that says I'm glad you're here. And this teacher he entertains the possibility that life is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying absolutely nothing and maybe you believe that.

The teacher also you know considers the idea that maybe life is a tale told by nobody and maybe that's where you are or maybe that life is not even a tale there's no narrative structure to reality you say.

[31 : 06] But our teacher says I thought about that and I've actually tried to live by all these thin and fragile temporary self-made meanings under the sun and the result in my own life was that I became cynical and I became bitter.

But what I want you to do my son what I want you to do my daughter what I want all of you to do he says is pay attention to those signs in your heart pay attention to all those clues in the world and ask yourself what do they mean?

He's begging the question is it possible to live a life that's not merely for what's under the sun? Is it can we live in a reality that takes into account what's above and beyond the sun?

You see our teacher's brilliant because he drives us to despair in this present reality and then he meets that despair with hope. He drives us to see the absurdity of things and then he meets that absurdity with meaning.

He drives us to say yes you're right everything is a vapor and then he confronts us with the reality of eternity and he says in the final chapter of this beautiful short book he says now all has been heard here's the conclusion of the matter fear God and keep his commandments for this is the duty of every human being for God will bring every deed into judgment including every hidden thing whether it is good or evil.

[32 : 35] He says my eyes see that life is meaningless and life is a vapor but my heart knows that God is there. My heart knows that God is someone that I must deal with.

My heart knows that God is somehow good and wise and just and that he's the one writing the story of history and the story of my life and so finally finally finally he tells us the real purpose and the real meaning of our lives in two words fear God fear God that's the conclusion of the matter he says it's the summary of the whole Bible stand in awe and wonder of this being who is permanent and supreme and worthy of your highest esteem stop living by what's merely by sight and what's here under the sun start living by faith and what's above and beyond the sun this God who is your maker this God who's your judge this God for whom you were made to love with all of your heart soul mind and strength now I could land the plane right there and hopefully

I've gotten you to think about the fact that maybe secularism is not really the way maybe I should consider deism or theism and that would be a good thing but the New Testament says that this God who's a maker and our judge has not only written these signs in our heart and these clues into the world he's the author who wrote himself into the story as the main character as Jesus Christ who was born in the manger and rose from the dead when you look at the gospel of John chapter 1 the opening words of that gospel say in the beginning was the logos and the logos was with God and the logos was God and that's an astonishing statement it's this incredible revolutionary claim that Jesus Christ he's the meaning behind the universe he's the reason for life that the universal order of the cosmos is in fact an individual person the power that undergirds all reality this absolute personal God became human and eternity stepped in to time and he was there and he saw us under the sun alienated and cut off from the life of God because of our preoccupation with ourselves because of our sin and our pride and so he came from beyond the sun and he became human and he died on a cross and on that cross what did he say my God my God why have you forsaken me and in that moment

God himself experienced the darkness and the meaninglessness of life without God which is the penalty for all of our sins Jesus got life without God so that we could have life with God he put himself in our lives of misery and mortality and meaninglessness so that we could be brought into his life of joy and immortality and eternal meaning and so friends I leave you with this that meaning is not a concept or a cause that you go out to find meaning with a capital M is a person who's come to find you and the purpose of life is to fear him to follow him to put your faith in him and when you do that you've found why it is that you're even here there's probably a ton of questions

I'll see you over here at the Q&A; in just a little bit but I'm going to park it there in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit Amen Amen