

Searching for meaning

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Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] So our reading is from the book of Ecclesiastes, which you'll find just after Psalms and Proverbs. And as Ben said, we'll be reading Ecclesiastes chapter 1.

The words of the teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem. Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher, utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless.

What do people gain from all their labours 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.

All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.

[1 : 05] All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear it's full 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 in 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.

[2 : 11] What is crooked cannot be straightened. 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.

Amen. What is the point of life? Why bother with anything at all? Why am I so unhappy?

Why do I never seem to get anywhere with anything that I do? Is God out there? Does God care about me? Why is the world full of suffering?

[3 : 13] Why is there so much injustice? Why doesn't God just fix everything? Why do the things that promise happiness not deliver it?

Is life worth living at all? Is there any point? Folks, if you've ever found yourselves asking those kinds of questions, well, Ecclesiastes is the book for you.

This book grapples with the biggest questions for the people of Israel back in the day, and they are still the biggest and hardest questions for us today. Now, sometimes I find myself wishing that this book were written rather differently than it is.

I find myself wanting a heading that asks a question, and then three to five paragraphs each of which has a very clear point, and then a conclusion that answers that question in a clear, conclusive manner.

The problem is, life isn't really like that, is it? In the realm of mathematics and computers and engineering, well, you can have that one right answer and say any other answer is just wrong.

[4 : 20] But people aren't computers. We don't always think completely logically. In fact, sometimes we hardly think logically at all. And therefore, the Bible engages us on that level as well.

Not that it's illogical or contrary to logic, but rather that it's coming at that one truth from a different angle, engaging different parts of our brains, engaging our emotions, engaging our hearts as well as our analytical centers.

And the writer of Ecclesiastes is something of an explorer. He's taking these big themes of life, and he's kind of picking them up and examining them and asking questions. And some of his answers that he finds as he asks those questions, some are much clearer than others.

But for sure, he's not satisfied with easy, trite answers. He's not okay with the kind of answers that we sometimes use to try and keep our kids quiet. It just is.

Because I said so. Now, that doesn't cut the mustard for this teacher. And nor do the sort of simplistic half-answers that sometimes sadly have been the best the church has offered to those who ask awkward questions.

[5 : 33] The teacher here in Ecclesiastes is not content with that, and we shouldn't be either. So Ecclesiastes is a book that quietly legitimizes our questions and our doubts and our musings.

So we may not find that this is a comfortable book. We might find as we go through this that it challenges some of the answers with which you have previously quieted your doubts.

But in challenging those easy answers, it is going to bring us deeper. Deeper into a knowledge of the God who made this universe. Deeper into relationship with the God who calls us to know him and to love him and to worship him.

So Ecclesiastes is also a great book for skeptics and agnostics, for people who are looking for meaning and not quite sure where to find it. People who are open to the idea of God, but not really sure whether to trust the Bible or trust the church or trust God.

Ecclesiastes, therefore, could well be the gateway to life. Ecclesiastes could be the most important book you ever read. So if you aren't already familiar with it, and I suspect for many of us it's not one of the books of the Bible that we're most familiar with, at least.

[6 : 49] If you're not already familiar with it, I'd encourage you to take the time to read it through over the next week or so if you can. It would take about 45 minutes to read it aloud altogether. I figured that was pushing it a bit even for me.

But to read it yourself should be quite a bit quicker than 45 minutes not doing it aloud. So make a cup of tea, read it in one go if you can. I think you'll find that helpful. And what you're going to find, and probably if you know anything about the book, it's this.

What you'll find is it is not the most immediately encouraging of books, is it? I mean, there's verse 2. Meaningless. Meaningless, says the teacher. Utterly meaningless.

Everything is meaningless. I mean, it sounds like the sort of philosophical insight you get from a gloomy teenager, doesn't it? Not what you'd expect to find in God's Word.

We find ourselves baffled, perhaps, by some of the points that this book makes. But David Gibson puts it well. He says, Part of the brilliance of Ecclesiastes is that it teaches us that life often slips through our fingers and eludes our comprehension by being itself elusive and perplexing.

[7 : 57] Yet Ecclesiastes also makes a very simple point. Life is complex and messy, sometimes brutally so, but there is a straightforward way to look at the mess. The end will put it all right.

The end, when we stand before God as our creator and judge, will explain everything. That's the conclusion of the last few verses of the book. 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.

Now what you may find as you read through the book as a whole, it may be that you find yourself thinking that that ending feels like it contradicts the body of the book.

Well, if you find yourself thinking that, you're in very good company, because many responsible interpreters come to exactly that conclusion. They figure that a second wise man has picked up the writings of his predecessor and looked at it and said essentially, well, here's what not to do.

[9 : 05] For me, it's hard to see what kind of an editor would choose to quote 12 whole chapters of content and then just contradict them with a couple of sentences at the end without, we would have to say, really engaging with the substance of the argument at all.

So I don't think that the book is sub-Christian. I don't think it's just an extended philosophical exploration that's then contradicted by an orthodox perspective at the end. No, the closing verses, they may be from another writer, another voice, but I don't think they come as a contradiction to

what's gone before, but rather they come as the appropriate conclusion, the conclusion that I think the teacher has in view from the very beginning of the book.

See, it is true that on a surface reading, this book can be pretty discouraging. If you were asked to summarize the message of the book, you might well instinctively give something like verse 2.

So, meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher. Or if you learned the older language of the King James, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. We'll come back to how we best translate and understand that in a minute.

But what I want to do first is to encourage you that there is more to Ecclesiastes than despair. Yes, this word, vanity, meaningless, it appears some 38 times in the course of the book, and the almost as well-known and arguably also rather negative, under the sun, that comes 29 times in the book.

[10:27] But would it surprise you that good and wisdom both appear more times than either, along with a whole variety of other much more positive ideas? It is not true that Ecclesiastes is unremittingly negative and depressing.

Actually, Ecclesiastes should help us to rightly worship the one true God. Because for all of its disappointments, for all that it grapples with hard truths, it also teaches us great truths about God. Ecclesiastes presents us God as the mighty creator, as the sovereign Lord, as the transcendent, all-powerful ruler of the universe.

Ecclesiastes presents God to us. One other preliminary point before we turn to chapter 1 specifically is to ask who wrote Ecclesiastes. Historically, the dominant position, the assumption, has been that this book, with the possible exception of a kind of frame around the edges, that the book is from King Solomon, the son of King David.

That fits with this statement in 1-1, the words of the teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem. And it's very similar to the opening of the book of Proverbs, the Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.

[11:45] We might, however, then want to ask, well, if he was happy to include his name in Proverbs, why he masks it with the title teacher here in Ecclesiastes. There's also a few other reasons, including some internal to the book, to suggest it may not be as straightforward as just saying Solomon wrote this book.

For instance, 1-12 says, I, the teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. Notice, was, past tense. But 1 Kings 11 seems pretty clear. Well, Solomon was still king at the point he died.

There isn't any point in Solomon's life when he could look back and say, I was once king. He was king the whole time. There's other arguments both for and against Solomon as author.

You can find people arguing passionately either way, including those who are solidly and unequivocally committed to taking Scripture seriously as God's infallible word. Seems wise, perhaps, not to be too dogmatic on the issue in this case.

Why does this matter? Well, what's helpful to accept is whether it's Solomon himself writing or someone else, the book is written from a Solomonic persona.

[12:56] Whoever writes it is creating the impression that these are appropriate thoughts that might be thought by Solomon. So when we come to the great projects, the immense pleasures, the chapter 2, trials or sources of meaning, well, those fit with the record of Solomon's life.

They fit more broadly with the opportunities available to a king that aren't necessarily available to everybody in all of life. The life of Solomon as recorded in the Bible is presented as the context for this book.

So that background is going to aid our understanding whether Solomon wrote it himself or someone else kind of presenting it in that context. Even more fundamentally, here's chapter 12, verse 11.

The words of the wise are like goads. They're collected sayings like firmly embedded nails, given by one shepherd. Who is that one shepherd who has given these things?

None other than God himself. Whoever put the pen on the paper, it's still true that these are the very words of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. This is God's own truth.

[14:02] So, there's Ecclesiastes. And the first 11 verses of chapter 1, they seem to be intended as something of an introduction to the book, presenting some of the major themes, the overall point that the teacher is making.

So, we're going to think about chapter 1, verses 1 to 11 now, and we'll do so under two headings. First, we see that life is brief and elusive. And second, that life is repetitive.

Life is brief and elusive. We return again to verse 2. Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher. Utterly meaningless, everything is meaningless. The teacher begins with shock tactics. He wants us to sit up and take notice. Unfortunately, we're immediately faced with a problem. We're forced to ask, what does it mean to say everything is meaningless?

This is one of those words that is notoriously hard to translate, because there isn't a single English word that really matches the variety of meaning of the Hebrew word in the original text.

[15:07] So, there's that. And then there's disagreement as to which nuance of that Hebrew word the author actually intends. And it's important, because this word comes up nearly 40 times in the book.

So, if we misunderstand this word, then it's actually hard to understand the message of the whole book. It's far more frequent, this word, here in Ecclesiastes than the rest of the Bible put together. So, what do we mean by this word? Well, the first thing to say is, in modern English, vanity is not a helpful translation. Made sense back in the day, but today we use vanity to refer to an unhealthy obsession with physical appearance rather than anything else.

That's not what we're talking about here in Ecclesiastes. Second option, what about the word meaningless as chosen by the NIV translators? Well, it's certainly a massive improvement.

You cannot argue that it isn't an appropriate word for what they mean. You can't argue that it's inappropriate to what's going on in the book. There seems to be a sort of despairing futility as a thread running through the book.

[16:12] That's there. Meaningless is appropriate in that sense. However, a simplistic understanding of total meaningless doesn't quite work.

So, for instance, chapter 4, verse 6, the teacher will say, better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. Now, if one thing is better than the other thing, then it cannot be that everything is meaningless.

There is relative meaning. So, let's go back to the Hebrew. The word is hevel and the literal meaning is something like breath, breeze, vapor.

Now, it does get used metaphorically to refer to meaninglessness elsewhere in the Bible, especially to emptiness, the incapability of idols. Hevel is used to characterize false gods who are meaningless, incapable.

But it's also there in Psalm 39 that we sang a few minutes ago. You've made my days a mere hand breath. The span of my years is as nothing before you. Everyone is but a breath.

[17:17] Hevel. Meaningless. Even those who seem secure. Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom. In vain. Hevel again. They rush about heaping up wealth without knowing whose it will finally be.

Psalm 144 has the same idea. Human beings but a breath here today and gone tomorrow.

Proverbs uses Hevel to refer to beauty that is so very fleeting.

And the teacher says life's like that. Life is but the merest of breaths. Life is like the puff of smoke when you blow out the candle. You can see it.

It's there. You can smell it. It's one of my favorite smells. But it's gone in a moment, isn't it? There's no permanent impact. There's no lasting impression.

It's a whisper in the wind. A wave in the ocean. It's there but inconsequential and fleeting. Here one moment, gone the next. You can try and grab that smoke but it slips through your fingers.

[18:18] Even that motion of trying to catch the smoke just disperses it faster. There's something about life that defies our best attempts to wrap our heads around it.

We go to great lengths to map the brain but we can't understand thought. We analyze the human body in microscopic detail but the soul defies our microscopes. Our experiences are incomprehensible and frustrating.

We understand some things and yet still find ourselves asking why is it always the day that you forgot your umbrella that it rains? Why are the traffic jams worse when you're in a hurry?

Why is it that no matter which lane you choose in the motorway queue is never the fastest moving?

Why do you find yourself just feeling blue that sells the truth? What do people gain?

Nothing. And he illustrates this in the remainder of this section by showing us that life is repetitive.

There's a question in the first week of the Hope Explored course that asks how you think the world is generally going.

[19 : 22] Is it generally getting worse? Generally getting better? Going around in circles or just chaotic and random? I wonder what your instinctive answer to that question is.

The teacher here in Ecclesiastes seems quite clear to his mind the world is going in circles. Not really getting anywhere at all with maybe a dose of chaos mixed in.

The sun rises just to go back to the start and do it all over again. The winds blow but tomorrow they're black blowing the opposite way again. All kinds of energy expended. Lots of frenetic motion but no progress made.

Plenty of apparent change that just disguises the fact everything is essentially the same as it ever was. The streams flow in the sea is never full. Nothing's ever enough.

Life like an infinite abyss that just swallows whatever you throw at it. Our eyes feast on an endless procession of images. On the TV so many channels they ran out of numbers and started calling them Dave.

[20 : 20] we scroll through the feeds on our phones Netflix, Hulu, Disney Plus haven't tried to track down any statistics but I'm pretty sure if you add together all the films and TV series that are being made I'm sure there's as much content produced in one day as a person could watch in a lifetime.

We feast our eyes but they're never satisfied. We never have enough. Again this repetitive lack of progress it resonates doesn't it?

One week of school is much like the next. You move on to university is it so very different? Are this week's customers going to need somehow new and different problems that they have to be helped with compared to last week's?

No. It'll be the same problems all over again. Even the things that look new and different how many of them really are? Here's an observation.

The children now love luxury. They have bad manners contempt for authority they show disrespect to their elders. Who said that do you think? One of the teachers down at Loudoun Academy?

[21 : 25] Could have been couldn't it? One of our politicians despairing of the youth of today and selling us on more money for the police or for the social services. Anyone want to take a punt?

Socrates. A few hundred years BC nothing changes. 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. You know the fallopian tubes that run from the ovaries to the womb we call them that because they were discovered by Gabriel Fallopio in 1561.

Except they weren't. A guy called Hierophilus living in Egypt wrote about them 2000 years before that. there is nothing new under the sun. Life is repetitive.

So what are we saying then? Is this what life is like without Jesus? A repetitive roundabout from a secular perspective that's all changed when you meet Jesus. What do you think?

[22 : 28] does that match your experience? No. This isn't the world as viewed through the lens of existential nihilism. This isn't the world according to postmodern philosophy.

This is just what the world is actually like. This is reality. Whether we're Christian or not we all of us live under the sun. We all of us live on this one earth where nothing is ever new.

So Gibson says being a Christian doesn't stop this being true. Rather it should make us the first to stop pretending it isn't true. The teacher is carefully laying the foundations for the main argument of his book.

Only preparing to die will teach us to live. And part of establishing that argument is the very simple point of these first eleven verses. In these days under the sun it is unavoidably true that we live in a world where we will soon be dead.

So what difference does it make being a Christian? Well folks when we know that we stand forgiven in Jesus we know that yes death is going to come and yes our days will be brief but we also know that death is not the end.

[23 : 50] We know that this world here and now under the sun which is as it's described here with all of its futility and frustration we know that this world under the sun is not the whole story.

We know that there is an eternity yet to come an eternity where we will no longer live lives of frustrated futility where we will no longer live as whispers in the winds but we will instead live eternally in the presence of our mighty loving God.

The teacher has plenty more to say about life under the sun. We've got plenty more questions to ask and plenty to grapple with but that must wait for another time. Let's pray.

Lord our God we thank you for your words to us this morning. We thank you that you show us the reality of the world in which we live.

You show us what our lives are like and you show us our need of you. We'll put eternity in our hearts we pray that we might be restless until we find our rest in you and that that knowledge of our future rest might indeed transform our present experience.

[25 : 20] That despite the futility and the frustration despite how brief our lives may be that we know what you have in store for us.

We know what you intend for us even here and now as we seek to love and to serve you all of our days and on into eternity.

Amen.