

Meaningless?

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[0 : 00] So I'd like to ask Jay Posnikoff to come forward. And one of the things that Jay is doing, he only found out a little while ago, but he's going to be an instructor at the Nipawin Bible College.

So that's exciting to know that we have, you know, he was at Hillsdale, and now he's going to go over to NBC and be an instructor there.

So thank you, Jay. Thank you. Good morning. Good to see you again. So as Charles said, my name is Jay Posnikoff.

I'm here with my wife, Caitlin, and our two kids, and also their grandpa and great-grandpa. So this is our first time at Davidson Community Bible Church, but certainly not our first time in the Davidson area.

We've lived in Saskatchewan our whole lives, and we've stopped across the highway on countless occasions as we've traveled between Saskatoon and Regina. And also, as Charles was saying, I've recently been hired as an instructor at Nipawin Bible College, but we currently live in Regina, where I am serving Hillsdale Baptist Church as an intern.

[1 : 19] And as you probably know, Hillsdale is associated with the Baptist General Conference of Canada, which is, as you've heard, the same denomination that you've recently joined.

And that means our churches are sisters, and sisters need to help each other out. One of the ways sister churches can help each other out is by sharing preachers.

The senior pastor of our church heard that Pastor Josh was going on a well-deserved sabbatical, so that's why I'm here today. It is an honor and a privilege to preach the word to you this morning, and thank you for the hospitality you've shown us already.

The text for my sermon is found in the Old Testament. It was written by a wise old king. You can make a case that he was the second wisest man to ever walk the face of the earth.

In one sense, he lived in a context very different from our own. And yet, when we read his ancient writings, we find some striking parallels to our current situation.

[2 : 34] Before we open our Bibles, I want to identify some foundational assumptions and beliefs that are presently shaping our culture.

And please stay with me as I speak somewhat abstractly here. I promise to make things more concrete and practical as we move on. Perhaps you've heard the saying, ideas have consequences.

Well, the ideas that our society has gradually been embracing over the last 60 years are having consequences. We see changes around us in every direction.

Think about the realms of communication or education, ethics, and shopping, for example. These aspects of our Canadian experience are quite different than they were even 25 years ago.

Some of these changes are due to advances in technology. But a lot of the changes we notice are the consequences of what could be called replacement ideas.

[3 : 40] These are basic ideas or foundational ideas about reality that have replaced the beliefs held or assumed by most of our parents and grandparents.

Philosophers and sociologists have a label for the atmosphere that's resulted from this exchange of ideas. And that label, maybe you've heard it before, is postmodernism.

Postmodernism. The postmodern atmosphere or ethos has been picking up steam steadily since the 1960s. And we're now at a point where the average young adult has thoroughly postmodern assumptions.

They've often picked up these assumptions slowly and unconsciously as they live their lives through screens. Apps, movies, TV, social media, texting, video games, etc.

Most of these technologies aren't inherently evil, but they aren't inherently good either. Technology disciplines us one way or another.

[4 : 49] Of course, many older adults have postmodern assumptions too. But Generation X, baby boomers, and today's great-grandparents observed a society that functioned on the ideas that postmodernism is replacing.

And that's no longer the case for younger people. In the world we live in, the five following beliefs, postmodern beliefs, are communicated daily in some form or another.

Number one, there is no truth with a capital T. We can't know it because we haven't experienced everything or heard everyone's voice yet.

Small-t truth is communally constructed. That is to say, truth is constructed by the community.

A given community may be tied to a physical location or exist via the internet. Belief number two, all gods and religions are of equal value.

[6 : 03] Anyone who chooses to be spiritual or religious is making a choice based on their upbringing or personal taste, just like they would at a buffet.

Number three, history is a complex series of random, disconnected events. There is no rhyme or reason to the past, and the human race has nothing to look forward to.

An all-encompassing, coherent story that applies to everyone cannot be told. Postmodern assumption number four, every form of self-expression that doesn't hurt others should be accepted and celebrated.

Intolerant people who won't accept and celebrate all such behaviors should be criticized and regarded with suspicion. And postmodern belief number five, self is sovereign.

Whatever feels good must be right. No one can tell me I am wrong. These beliefs are relatively new to Western society, at least at a popular level.

[7 : 20] But we know from Scripture that there is nothing new under the sun. One biblical figure in particular held to very similar beliefs, and he decided to follow through on them.

His story is scattered throughout the Old Testament, but the opening chapters of Ecclesiastes are where we'll focus this morning. Please turn there with me. The opening chapters of Ecclesiastes would be page 539 in the Pew Bible.

I'm reading from the NIV. 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.

[8 : 28] 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.

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.

The question that immediately confronts us is, who is this nameless teacher? These are his words, so if we know who he is, we're going to have a better understanding of them.

[9 : 37] If I pick up a book, and I haven't heard of the author before, I want to find out who that author is. Where is he coming from? What should I expect? Who are his influences?

Well, in this case, we learn that the man behind Ecclesiastes is Jewish royalty. More specifically, he's a son of David, king in Jerusalem.

As I was meditating on this passage this week, it dawned on me that we're talking about a son of David in Davidson. I didn't plan on that, but there you have it. Now, David only had one son who really became king in Jerusalem, so the obvious answer to our question would be none other than King Solomon.

But some Christians are skeptical about that conclusion. They seriously doubt that he wrote Ecclesiastes. I think that's mistaken and sad, because they can't read Ecclesiastes with the knowledge that Solomon wrote it.

Again, when you know who the author of a book is, you're going to have a better understanding of it. I believe we're supposed to know that this is Solomon writing, because he essentially says so. [10:52] It's about as clear as it would be if I said, the man I'm thinking of is the son of Pierre Trudeau. He's the prime minister in Ottawa, and he used to be a teacher.

You all know who I'm talking about. And we should all know who the author of Ecclesiastes is, because he tells us in three places. We've already seen one of them.

Although, to be fair, the objection is that son can sometimes mean descendant in Scripture. So verse 1 alone is not conclusive evidence pointing towards Solomon.

It could have been another one of David's descendants who was king in Jerusalem. Then in verse 16 of chapter 1, we read this. Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me.

This is the second piece of evidence that points to Solomon. We know from 1 Kings 10 that King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth.

[11:53] But some Christians will read Ecclesiastes 1.16 and say, that can't be Solomon because only David had ruled over Jerusalem before him. I could point you to a commentary where this objection is made.

But it doesn't hold water. David was the only Israelite king before Solomon to rule over Jerusalem. But Jerusalem had already been a city for centuries.

Many kings ruled over it before David did. In fact, two kings of Jerusalem whose names end with Zedek are mentioned in the Bible.

Remember Melchizedek from Genesis 14? Well, he's described as the king of Salem, which Psalm 76 tells us is a short form of Jerusalem. Then in Joshua 10, we learn about a Canaanite king of Jerusalem named Adonizetek.

Of course, there would have been many more kings of Jerusalem than these two Zedek's. But these are the two that are mentioned in Scripture. So, this second piece of evidence, where the author claims to have increased in wisdom more than anyone who ruled over Jerusalem before him, makes perfect sense if Solomon wrote it.

[13:08] The third piece of evidence is found in the second chapter of Ecclesiastes, verse 7. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

This is an indication of his wealth. Earlier in Ecclesiastes, we heard about the king's unprecedented wisdom. Now we're hearing about his unprecedented wealth.

If we bring these three strands of evidence together, here's what they amount to. The author of Ecclesiastes is a son of David, who is also the wisest and wealthiest king to ever rule over Jerusalem.

The Old Testament describes no other king of Jerusalem in those terms. To me, that proves beyond a reasonable doubt that the author of Ecclesiastes is Solomon.

Solomon is the guy. Therefore, for the rest of this message, I'm going to refer to the author of Ecclesiastes as Solomon. After introducing himself, Solomon the teacher begins to teach in verse 2 of our passage.

[14:10] Ecclesiastes 1, verse 2. Meaningless. Meaningless. Other translations will say vanity. Futile. Pointless.

Vapor. Everything is meaningless. Feel the weight of that statement for a moment.

Pointless. Meaningless. Absolutely everything is meaningless. There is no point to anything you do. No real reason to get out of bed this morning. No reason to put a smile on your face or to go to work or to eat. It's all meaningless.

It's all meaningless. Already we can see a link between the postmodern beliefs of our culture and the teaching of Solomon. There's actually a name for this particular outlook on life that university students might learn about in a philosophy class.

[15:13] It's called nihilism. N-I-H-I-L-I-S-M. Nihilism. I would suggest that it's the most logical outworking of postmodernism.

If the five beliefs I outlined earlier are your starting point, nihilism is where you should end up. It's a depressing and overwhelming philosophy.

Why do we have such a shortage of pastors coming down the pipe? Partly because of nihilism. Young adults are growing up thinking that this world, this life is meaningless.

Solomon writes the next nine verses from this hopeless perspective. He wonders aloud what people gain from all their labors under the sun.

The sun is almost like the villain of Ecclesiastes. It appears 32 times, which is twice as much as it does in any other book of the Bible. Psalms is the next closest with 16.

[16:19] We usually welcome the sun in Saskatchewan. We welcome it and we think that it's a great thing. But if you've spent time in a desert or a hot climate like the Middle East, you'll know that the sun is more of an enemy than a friend.

It beats down on you day after day after day. Meaningless. You'll notice that Solomon portrays nature as constant in this first lecture.

The earth, the sun, the wind, streams that flow into the sea, these are all permanent in Solomon's mind. But people are portrayed as temporary.

The generations come and go. No one remembers the former generations. And the future generations won't be remembered by those who follow them. It's apparent that Solomon has done a lot of observing and reflecting.

He knows from decades of experience that the eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. He's seen all that goes on under the meaningless sun, and he comes to the meaningless conclusion that there's nothing new.

[17:32] Anything that appears to be new is just something old in a new disguise. How meaningless. Next, Solomon pulls back the curtain a bit and reveals how he came to the conclusion that everything is meaningless.

Verse 12. I, the teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. Now, I'm not sure if the NIV's translation is best here.

Monarchs nearly always reign until they die. Queen Elizabeth II would be our example of that. Some people even use this as an argument against Solomon's authorship.

The translation choice the NIV has made is certainly legitimate. It's possible. But I think a translation like the NASB, which says, I have been king over Israel in Jerusalem, eliminates any confusion. Earlier in Solomon's reign, as king over Israel in Jerusalem, he decided to apply his mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens.

[18:51] Verse 13. This is one of the places where knowing Solomon's identity and background is important. You see, his reign was unusually peaceful.

1 Kings 4 informs us that Solomon had a large kingdom with peace on all sides and that during his lifetime, the people of Israel and Judah lived in safety. Solomon had very few military threats from without and very few threats from within.

Remember, there was no democracy or official opposition party in Israel. He had all the power, wisdom, and wealth he could ever want.

Everyone was beneath him. Slaves and servants were at his beck and call. But then a terrible thing happened. Solomon got bored.

There's been a glaring absence thus far in the book of Ecclesiastes. We've made it to the first half of verse 13 without hearing about God once.

[19:55] The second half of verse 13 is the first we hear of him. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind. Solomon uses his wisdom to explore everything that happens under the sun and he comes away with the sense that God has laid a heavy burden on mankind.

But let's back up for a minute. How did he ever get into this position? Shortly after Solomon became king, the Lord appeared to him in a dream.

In that dream, God makes a remarkable offer. Ask for whatever you want me to give you. As you may recall, Solomon asks for a discerning heart to govern God's people and to distinguish between right and wrong.

It's fascinating that hardly any English translations of the Bible use the word wisdom in Solomon's request. He doesn't ask for wisdom exactly.

He also doesn't just ask for discernment in general. He asks for discernment in order to lead and judge Israel well. That's significant.

[21:12] Upon hearing Solomon's request, the Lord promises to give Solomon wealth and honor in addition to what he asked for. Moreover, God promises Solomon a long life if he'll only walk in obedience to him.

We left off a minute or two ago with Solomon's boredom. We established that he had everything he could ever want. And we've just backtracked a bit to show that he had everything he could ever want because God had given it to him.

Then Solomon gets to a point where he's looking for the next thing that will excite him. We'd call it a midlife crisis. I'm going to guess, and this is an educated guess, that it was right around the time the Lord's temple was being completed that this boredom started to set in.

If my guess is correct, this is only 11 years into his 40-year reign. Solomon had to face that test. Solomon had to face that test.

[22 : 40] Solomon had to face that test. He accomplished everything he was expected to accomplish after only 11 years as king. We know from 1 Kings that Solomon had 29 years left on the throne.

That's a long time, especially for a man who has a massive longing for significance. So Solomon resolves to pursue something truly meaningful, something that will satisfy his longing.

It becomes his obsession. But God fades into the background. Wisdom is the first thing Solomon tries.

He reads philosophy. He hangs out with the scholars. He becomes an intellectual. That turns out to be meaningless. But he does learn something of value in the process.

With much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief. After wisdom, Solomon pursues madness and folly.

[23 : 49] He associates madness with laughter and folly with wine in the next chapter. The picture we get is of someone who temporarily escapes responsibility and forgets the problems of life.

Today, this is the perpetual partier. Or it's the basement dweller who gets drunk on his couch while he binge watches some foolish comedy show past 2 a.m.

Madness and folly turn out to be like chasing after the wind. You never catch it. Madness and folly never satisfy your deepest longing, warns Solomon.

Solomon's obsession continues to plague him. So he pursues pleasure next. This is the one that a lot of middle class people get stuck on in our society.

The difference between Solomon and most pleasure seekers in our day is that they don't have the resources or the money to finance all their pleasures.

[24 : 56] They never reach their mountaintop, so they keep pursuing small doses of pleasure on the weekends and whenever they get a chance.

In chapter 2, we read about some of these things that Solomon thinks will bring him pleasure. I undertook great projects.

I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. Of course, today, people will build a big house for themselves or a big cabin thinking that that will give them what they're seeking.

It says in verse 7, Thankfully, we don't have a direct parallel to this today in Canada, but the business owner might try to increase his business in such a way that he can hire more and more employees and have power over them.

In verse 7 of chapter 2, Solomon says, I bought, sorry, I own more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

[26 : 11] The farmer and his livestock, he thinks that they will satisfy his desires. Silver, gold, and treasure are mentioned in verse 8.

There's not a whole lot of difference today. Money and stocks. People think this is what will satisfy them. Also in verse 8, Solomon says that he acquired singers, male and female, concerts, entertainment.

That's what people think will satisfy them today. And also in verse 8, it says that he acquired a harem. Now, I was going to explain that a little bit, but we could just think of maybe mistresses in waiting.

I realize there are kids in the service, and I'm not going to be more explicit than that. Apart from slavery and a harem, these things aren't sinful, but Solomon made them his delight.

And that's where he went wrong. And they turned out to be meaningless. You'll see at the end of verse 8 there, he talks about the delights of a man's heart.

[27 : 30] Men, I think the majority of us have walked a mile in Solomon's shoes to some extent. Women, don't feel bad if you can't quite relate to Solomon here.

Maybe he infuriates you or disgusts you. The truth is, he's a red-blooded male, searching desperately for meaning and significance in ways that are tempting to men. Women tend to have slightly different desires, and they try to satisfy them in different ways. For example, a Christian author by the name of Christina Fox suggests that mothers try to satisfy the longings of their hearts by pursuing children, achievement and success, comfort, control, and approval.

Once again, these things aren't wrong in themselves, but when they become your heart's delight, then they do.

They do become wrong. In verse 10, we see that Solomon denied himself nothing his eyes desired. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.

[28 : 45] I refused my heart no pleasure. Then in verse 12 and following, we see that he returns to wisdom and folly.

Wisdom and folly were the first things he tried. And yet we have wisdom from elsewhere in the Bible that says, as a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly.

And this is an example of that. Solomon also tries work. Maybe he can find his meaning in his work. And in verses 24 to 26 of Ecclesiastes chapter 2, we read these words. A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil.

This too, I see, is from the hand of God. For without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness.

[29 : 47] But to the sinner, he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless.

Chasing after the wind. Solomon had some deficiencies in his theology.

There were some gaps in his knowledge of God. And I want to identify three of those for us this morning. Number one, he had an underdeveloped view of the afterlife.

His concept of eternity was almost non-existent. We didn't read about it too much in these first two chapters. But if you read the rest of Ecclesiastes, you can see that this comes out in Solomon's thinking.

He thinks that this life, say, 80, 90 years are all there is. And that's not the case.

[30 : 53] We know that now. But Solomon didn't realize that. You've maybe heard the term progressive revelation before. It means that God progressively or over time reveals things to us.

And so we are in a position where we know more than Solomon had access to. He didn't quite know the same things that we know.

And so we're identifying some of these deficiencies or gaps in his understanding. Now the second thing could have been known by him at his time.

The second deficiency in his theology is that he had no delight in God. He had no delight in God. We never have a hint that he enjoys the Lord.

He sees living in God's world merely as a duty. You probably heard the famous conclusion to the book of Ecclesiastes.

[31 : 55] But in case you haven't, I'll read it here. Now all has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments. For this is the duty of mankind.

For God will bring every deed into judgment. That's the conclusion to this book of Ecclesiastes. And that word duty really stands out.

It differs from Solomon's father. Solomon's father, of course, was King David. And in the Psalms, we see that David delighted in God.

He delighted in the Lord. For example, Psalm 27. One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.

David's delight was in God. Psalm 37. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

[32 : 59] The sons of Korah also have a similar psalm that talks about delighting in the Lord. How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty. This is Psalm 84. My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord.

My heart and flesh cry out for the living God. Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. So the first deficiency in Solomon's theology was that he had an underdeveloped view of the afterlife.

The second was that he did not delight in God. And the third is that Solomon did not know the wisest man to ever walk the face of the earth. According to Matthew 12, verse 42, the queen of Sheba came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here. He's infinitely wiser. The whole universe belongs to him, and he's far more powerful, namely the Lord Jesus Christ. By the way, do you know one of the projects he's working on at the moment? [34 : 14] He's building a temple, and we're it. Ephesians 2.22, listen to this. In Christ Jesus, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Those are the deficiencies in Solomon's theology, but I want to revisit some of those postmodern assumptions and kind of analyze those, I guess, now that we have some further knowledge. Number one, there is no truth with a capital T. That's the first postmodern assumption. Solomon lived like this was true for multiple years of his life, even though he may never have admitted it. Eventually, he acknowledged that God's ways are best, but as we just saw, he didn't go far enough. Jesus is the truth with a capital T.

God's Word is truth. Our Creator has revealed Himself so we can know truth with a capital T. [35 : 29] The second postmodern assumption, all gods and religions are of equal value. Again, Solomon believed this lie. His actions proved it.

We didn't talk about it this morning, but Solomon worshipped the pagan gods of his wives. He married women from nations that God had commanded Israel not to marry.

They had other gods. Solomon worshipped those gods. All gods and religions are not of equal value. Only the triune God of the Bible satisfies and saves.

The third postmodern assumption, history is a complex series of random, disconnected events. Solomon believed this too.

Everything is meaningless. Actually, history is moving toward a goal. One way of summarizing the storyline of the Bible is to use four simple words.

[36 : 38] Creation, fall, redemption, restoration. That's the storyline of the Bible and our world and of history. The Bible makes that clear.

History is moving toward a goal. The fourth postmodern assumption, every form of self-expression that doesn't hurt others should be accepted and celebrated.

Solomon wanted God and the citizens of Israel to accept his harem. He didn't think he was hurting anybody. Besides, he was born with his desires.

The question isn't, are we hurting anybody? The question is, am I violating one of God's good commands?

At minimum, that should be the question. We could perhaps even ask better questions than that. But at minimum, the ethical question is, am I violating one of God's good commands?

[37 : 42] And the fifth postmodern assumption is, self is sovereign. No one could tell Solomon what to do. He was a lone ranger.

Of the five postmodern doctrines I've outlined, this is the one. Christians repeatedly swallow, hook, line, and sinker. They buy this lie that they are individuals responsible and accountable only to themselves.

The fact is that God is sovereign. He gets to tell us what to do through his word and the authority structures he's created.

This requires submitting to various authority figures, such as bosses, government officials, pastors, parents, police, teachers, so on and so forth.

I'll close with this. The search for meaning ends with the Lord Jesus Christ. For by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him.

[39 : 07] everything is not meaningless. Meaning and significance are found in Christ. in Christ.