

A Search For The Meaning Of Life(1)

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[0 : 00] Let's turn together now to Ecclesiastes chapter 1. Let's just read through the first three verses again. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

What is life about? Why do we humans exist? Does human life have a purpose?

Does it have meaning? Is there meaningfulness to life as we live it in this world? If so, what is that meaning? What is that purpose?

Well, Ecclesiastes, we could say, is a book to which you could give the title, A Search for the Meaning of Life. That's how we're going to take it as we begin today, looking at a series of studies through the book of Ecclesiastes.

[1 : 06] Sometimes we'll have to take fairly large chunks of it, but we're beginning with these three verses, which really introduces the book and its topics to us. It's a search for the meaning of life.

The writer of Ecclesiastes set out, as he tells us here, having acquired great wisdom, and I applied, he says in verse 13, my heart, to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

He's searching for a meaning, for a purpose, to our human life, to our existence, to the activities, to the experiences, to the relationships, to everything that we know of in this world as it is in itself.

And he's asking the question, what is it about? And he's come to the conclusion, it's vanity of vanities. But we'll see that that's qualified by some of the other phrases that he uses here.

So Ecclesiastes, you might say, is a rich tapestry or cloth, woven together from different strands and colors, some of the main threads of it we can pick out as we go through the book of Ecclesiastes.

[2 : 16] But they all come together to form this rich tapestry of teaching in the book as a whole. And some of the primary threads are set out here in the first three verses, because this is really his way of introducing the topic by setting out the main emphasis and the main thing about which he's going to speak in these first three verses.

And then we'll see something of the overall pattern emerging even before we finish our first study today. We're going to look at, if we think of this as a tapestry, first we're going to look at setting up the loom on which this tapestry is woven. We'll ask the question, well, who is the weaver? And what are the main threads of the tapestry or the cloth that he's weaving in these first three verses? And then secondly, we'll look at the pattern emerging from that. As you see a loom, and as you see the beginning of a cloth that's being woven on the loom, in a little time after the weaver has started, you'll see the pattern developing as the cloth begins to develop. So that's what happens here as well, as we look at even the first three verses. You'll see something of the pattern of the cloth that he's going to weave throughout the book already emerging in these first three verses. So setting up the loom in these first few verses. Who is the weaver? Who is it that's speaking these words? Who is it that wrote the book of Ecclesiastes? There's no name given, but we're given clues at the beginning. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Verse 12, he says, I, the preacher, have been king over Jerusalem. Verse 16,

I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me. And most trustworthy writers who take the Bible seriously will take the view that this was written by Solomon. There are some parts of the book that may be difficult to fit into what you know of Solomon's life from elsewhere in the Bible. But we're taking it that it is indeed Solomon who formed the main part, at least, of what Ecclesiastes has to teach us, that it came from his search, from his knowledge, from his wisdom.

He was known for such, even though later in his life he strayed badly from the ways of obedience to God. So it fits with what you find throughout the book, the person of Solomon, the experiences of Solomon, the way in which Solomon had such an amazingly rich life in human terms, as we'll find the phrase under the son of Solomon. And he was certainly somebody who had everything, everything he could wish for, in power, prestige, riches, wives, you name it, he had it all. And as he set out to find meaning, the book of Ecclesiastes is what he concluded from that, as he came to look at life under the sun.

So this is the author of it, but notice he's saying the words of the preacher. And the word preacher there is not just preacher in the sense in which I'm a preacher, and you know of preachers of the gospel the way we know it today.

[5 : 30] Preacher is a word in Hebrew that's related to the Hebrew word for assembly or congregation. And so there's a clue there that this is actually for public consumption. This is not a letter written to a private individual.

This is not something that's intended just for an individual use. This is for a congregation. This is for the church. This is for public consumption. This is for the assembly. That's where the name of the book comes from, in fact, because around a couple of hundred years or so before, Jesus came into the world. A translation was made of the Old Testament in Greek. It came to be known as the Septuagint.

It was written by 70 scholars. And the word in Greek for assembly or church is ekklesia. And you can see how ekklesiastes came from that Greek word ekklesia.

So that's where the title ekklesiastes came from in the Bible as we now have it. But it's this preacher, this person who set out to instruct, this person who wrote this book for people to actually consider together, for something of the life of their community, of their church, of their congregation.

And he also says, in Jerusalem, so as to the covenant community, I, David, he says, son of David, king in Jerusalem. And as he said, as we see later, verse 3, the preacher, I've been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

[6 : 54] This is for the covenant community. This is for God's people. This is what you might say is for the church, for the likes of ourselves today. In other words, it's not a book written specifically or primarily as an evangelistic tool.

It's not addressing atheists. It's not addressing humanists or secularists primarily. It's addressing the people of God. It's addressing people who know God, who know the gospel, who know the salvation of God set out in the Bible.

It doesn't mean, of course, you can't use ecclesiastes evangelistically, that you can't use its arguments against atheism, against secularist views of life. Because, as we'll see, under the sun basically is taking a secularist view of life, that there's nothing more than that, nothing more than this world.

And, of course, you can use ecclesiastes, and has been very profitably used and blessed of God, when its teaching is unfolded to those who would begin their own view of life by saying, there is no God, there is no meaning, there's no actual purpose to human life.

Well, ecclesiastes sets out to prove that there is, but it's not under the sun. You need to take God into the picture with you. So, it's in Jerusalem. It's not primarily evangelistic.

[8 : 12] So, it's for our consumption today. And you could say that for us as a congregation, ecclesiastic, as we'll see, ecclesiastes is incredibly relevant. It's up to date.

It's actually addressing the situation that we face as a congregation, as well as individuals, in the world around us. It's addressing the big, big questions of human life, of human thinking, of human concern.

What is my life about? Why do I exist? Is there meaning to my life? And if so, where do I find it? You see, that's why this is so much up to date.

This is why it's so worthwhile, not just because it is, of course, part of God's Word, the Bible, but like every other part of the Bible, you're neglected at your peril.

You don't actually say, well, it's no longer relevant for the world as we know it today. This was written way, way back in centuries and millennia ago. No, it's absolutely up to date.

[9 : 13] Because this preacher, this son of David, this king in Jerusalem, he applied his knowledge, his wisdom. This is what he comes up with.

This is God's Word to us today about human life. So let's look at the main threads of it then in these first three verses. Because there are a number of phrases here that really color the whole book throughout it.

The main threads appear here and then they reappear throughout the book as we see, God willing, as we go through it. The first one is vanity of vanities. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher.

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Now that word vanity, literally in Hebrew, means a vapor or a breath.

Something that exists only for a very short time and then it's gone. And it carries with it something of the idea as well of futility.

[10 : 11] You'll find some translations using the word futility. Because that's really in a sense part of the message of Ecclesiastes. As you look at life merely from a human perspective, it seems to be nothing more than futility.

All of this labor, all of this work, all of this toil and what does it come to? Where is there meaning to it? Where is there purpose to it? He's using this word vanity. This word that means something fleeting, something flimsy.

That appears not really to have much substance to it. If you think of a bubble, think of a bubble and what it's like, how flimsy, how fleeting it is.

You admire it for a moment, then pop, it's gone. It's away from view. It's just something transitory. That's the meaning of the word vanity.

All, he says, is vanity. Now that appears, as you look at it, to be somewhat extreme, doesn't it? Does he really mean that all is vanity? Does he mean that everything in human existence, in all our experiences, and all that we know of in this life as we live it in this world, is it nothing more than just vanity?

[11 : 23] Is it just like a bubble? Is there nothing more valuable than just a flimsy, fleeting, transitory existence, and then that's it? Why is he saying all is vanity?

Why is it saying that this is what characterizes life? Well, that's the next phrase. Why, the next phrase is important when he says that everything under the sun is vanity.

You see, in verse 3, what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? Now, if you just take verse 2 by itself, you'd think this man was really a pessimist, that he was a cynic, in fact, that he saw nothing about human existence worth praising at all, and that there was nothing but hopelessness all around him.

But that's why you need to take verse 3 very closely tied to verse 2, because what Solomon is doing, what the preacher is doing, is looking at life merely from a human perspective only.

He's really saying, let's for argument's sake, keep everything under the sun. Let's not go beyond the fringes, the borders of this life as we know it, of this world as we know it, and for argument's sake, this is what he's doing, he's saying, for argument's sake, let's keep God out of it for the moment, for argument's sake.

[12 : 42] Let's just look at things without taking God into our perspective, without taking eternity into our perspective, without taking any of those things that have to do with God, with salvation, with anything that God himself has revealed of himself, of his redemption.

Let's leave all that aside for the moment, for argument's sake, he's saying, let's look at life just under the sun. Just mere human existence.

And for argument's sake, let's pretend that's all there is to it. Well, what do you get? What you get is a bubble, a flimsy, fleeting, meaningless thing.

You can't find purpose under the sun because you're leaving out the most important part of a reckoning and that is God. And God's will, and God's purpose, and God's revelation of himself, and God's salvation, and God in Christ.

He's building up the argument so that we'll come to the same conclusion as he has come to. That human existence, apart from God, has nothing more than just vanity of vanity.

[14 : 03] all is vanity. All is purposeless. All is meaningless. There's no structure to it in any lasting way.

And then in verse 3, he uses this word gain. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. All is fleeting. All is bubble-like. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

I was using the word toil very deliberately because toil means hard labor in the sense of this word. It's not just a little bit of work here and there. It's not just a recreation. It's not just something you do as a pastime.

We're really talking about toil. And it has the idea in it of grief and also of frustration because very often toil means you're not really getting quite to the objective that you have in mind in your toil.

You just don't quite reach the target. You always seem to fall short despite how hard you work. There's always something ahead of you that you'll have achieved. And he's saying that's the toil under the sun that man experiences.

[15 : 15] And he's using the word man deliberately there. What does man gain? Focusing in on man himself. Focusing on our humanness in itself. Focusing on nothing more than humanness.

Just confining things to our human existence. To our human thoughts. To our human life. To life without God. Without taking God into the picture. What is gained by that?

The word gain has again a very significant meaning in Hebrew. It means literally something that's left over. A surplus. Something that you find left over that you can look at.

Think again of the bubble. Think of a child blowing bubbles. Whether it's small ones or large ones that capture the colors. Whether of the sky or all the colors that you find in a bubble.

There's the child with the bubble. Admiring it as it floats away and then bang! It's gone. What is the surplus? What is left? Or if you have a bubble just landing in front of you.

[16 : 21] On your table. Wherever. You poke it with your finger. What do you have left? Not much. Very little in fact. What is the gain?

What is the surplus? What are you left with? Well the answer of Ecclesiastes is under the sun if you look at it just like that nothing much. In fact hardly anything at all.

And that's where it's important to realize that that's what he's doing. Because as you go through the Bible of course and indeed as you go through parts of Ecclesiastes too we can see that there's more to life than life under the sun.

That there's more to life than life lived in this world. That there is in fact a gain and indeed a labor in a spiritual sense.

And when you look at what the Bible tells us elsewhere for example 1 Corinthians just to pick up that one verse 1 Corinthians 15 wonderful long discourse about resurrection.

[17 : 23] What is resurrection? It's triumph over death isn't it? Well he's saying as we'll see elsewhere in Ecclesiastes if you just look at life under the sun and you just look at how death forms such a prominent feature of human existence under the sun you could say in a sentence it's all marked by death.

Is there anything at all but death? Life comes and life goes. One generation follows another. Birth and death is that about it? Listen to Paul having spoken about resurrection triumph over death in Christ.

Therefore my beloved brothers be steadfast immovable always abounding in the work of the Lord knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

When you go back to Ecclesiastes under the sun your labor is vanity your labor is vain your labor is just mere futility but in the Lord there's no futility about it there's no meaninglessness about it.

Christ gives purpose to your life. Taking God into the picture fills life with meaning and gives something to even life under the sun when you take God into your reckoning that really gives you a purpose and a meaning to your life.

[18 : 51] So the writer is no mere cynic. He's not a pessimist. He's not somebody who's just prone to looking at the dark side of things all the time and coming to these conclusions because that's really all he's prepared to do.

This man's a realist. He knows what life under the sun is like. He knows that we need to ascend above the sun in order to reach purpose and meaning to human life.

I'm sure you've been on the plane many times and sometimes you know when you leave not just when it's stormy but very often stormy it's overcast it's low cloud it's drizzly okay other parts of the country have that as well of course but the point is sometimes wherever it is you leave and it's overcast and it's drizzly and you're getting into the plane and off it goes and within a few minutes it's climbing up and all of a sudden it breaks through the clouds and what's above the clouds bright sunshine so different to what you had beneath and that's really what Ecclesiastes is doing he's saying you live your life under the sun you live your life just looking at things in merely human terms you live your life just listening to what humanists or secularists will say to you and tell you this is what life is about and all you do is just look at the gloom that you have under the sun you need to rise through the clouds you need to go up to where God is you need to take God into your picture you need to take Jesus into the picture you need to take Christ into your life you need to find meaning in Christ because it's nowhere else that's why in Corinthians first Corinthians again

David Paul was taking the thinking of the time and the Jews or the Greeks as well who seek after wisdom and influence and status and meaning but we he says preach Christ crucified the wisdom of God and the power of God you see you leave Christ out of it what have you got you've got a bubble once the bubble is pierced and it's burst it's gone what is left what is again nothing much they're setting up the loom these are the main threads of it vanity of vanities all is vanity but that's looking at life under the sun in merely human terms and as you do so that's the conclusion you reach you need to get beyond that and answer the question what does man gain by that which he toils under the sun that takes us to the second point today which is to finish off with we've seen him setting up the loom now you see the pattern beginning to emerge we've alluded to that and mentioning how we need to go above the level of being under the sun of just merely human terms and bring God into the picture how will we conclude today what is the application of what we've seen so far well two points live life in Christ and secondly live life for Christ live life in Christ make sure that you are in Christ today make sure that you're living your life more than just mere human existence more than just the passing cycles as we'll see next time of what you're aware of in this world or the passing cycles in your own life make sure that you're living life in Christ that's what the gospel really offers to us that's what

God's great demonstration in the gospel is about I have provided life for you he's saying I have provided for you a savior I have provided something above the sun not just under the sun trust in him give your life over to him if you haven't accepted him already this is what Ecclesiastes is really counseling you indeed exhorting you to do trust in Christ accept Christ live in Christ Paul uses the term in Christ so frequently his life is in Christ is rooted in Christ when you come to take Jesus the Jesus that's offered in the gospel what then happens well it's an amazing change isn't it because when God changes somebody's life and brings you to be anchored in Christ and when you through faith willingly come to place your life in Christ and in Christ's hands you're a new creation all things have become new it's no longer living under the clouds of just mere human existence you've risen above you're looking at the sun the sun is shining in on your life

[23 : 59] Jesus is all and everything to you and if you look at Ecclesiastes although there's more to it than this it is a book really about human beings seeking satisfaction where can I find fulfillment where can I find satisfaction in my life I know the Christian life is more as we'll see in a minute than just looking for satisfaction personally but there is that element to it God created us in the beginning to be satisfied in himself to know meaning and purpose in a relationship with God that's what we lost when we fell in Adam that's what we regain by rebirth in Christ live in Christ you know satisfaction was something Solomon did not have despite all that the

Lord had given him by way of ability and gifts and treasures we'll come to it eventually but chapter 2 verses 1 to 11 really summarizes where the preacher where this man is saying I said in my heart I will test you with pleasure and all the way through there he had wine he had wives he had gardens he had vineyards he had palace he had female slaves male slaves possessions herds flocks more than anyone who had been before me in Jerusalem silver and gold and treasure of kings singers and women and concubines the delight of the children of man I became great and I surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem also my wisdom remained with me I kept my heart from no pleasure for my heart found pleasure in all my toil and this was my reward for all my toil and I considered it all what did he say behold it was all vanity and a striving after wind and there was nothing to be gained under the sun you see he had everything a man could wish for didn't lack for anything he could command anything and it be brought to him and he's saying when you look at it all what's the meaning of it where's satisfaction where's what meets the need of my heart because looking at it in itself he says all of this that I have it's just like a bubble that's about to burst what do

I left behind if that's all I have well as Jesus himself may very well have been thinking of please he asked us Matthew 16 verse 26 what shall it profit what gain is it to a man though he should gain the whole world and far feet or lose his soul what's the profit what's the point of gaining everything under the sun that you can possibly wish for and then be lost forever lose your soul and without Jesus that's what's going to happen to you live in Christ didn't Jesus himself say in John chapter 6 remember that great passage in the sermon on the mount as it's usually called which is a treatise really on what the most important things in life are very often Jesus would be basing his thoughts upon what he himself knew from the

Old Testament and the likes of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is do not he says lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and seal but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys in other words he's saying don't just live life under the sun live for heaven live for eternity and the rest of that passage as you well know Jesus took the things that you find in nature and the birds of the air the flowers of the field and even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these but what's the passage marked by anxiety don't be anxious about what you put on about tomorrow about what you'll wear don't be anxious about these things he says but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness that's the priority because under the sun is futility striving after wind a bubble which bursts all too soon and there's nothing left there's no substance live life in

Christ secondly live life for Christ because life as I said is not is not primarily about satisfaction though that's an important part of it and Ecclesiastes does indeed provide us with the source of satisfaction but just to describe human life or a Christian life as a satisfied life is really to be too inward looking if you like or basing it with a focus too much on ourselves because life is not just about satisfaction and receiving and experiencing satisfaction in Christ life is for God for glorifying God for giving honour to God for giving thanks to God and that's why everything we have must be to God's glory yes you live in Christ but live for him too every single gift that Solomon had he realised was from

[29 : 57] God and without God there were nothing what profit was there and all the things he had without God you can be absolutely destitute of all the things that Solomon had and of things that other people have in this world but when you have Christ you have everything you're rich beyond words you have meaning and purpose and you live to the end for which God created you to glorify him as well as to enjoy him whatever you do Paul said to the Corinthians whatever you do in word or in deed do all in the name of Jesus you serve the Lord Christ and you shall receive the reward of the inheritance from him John

Wesley apparently when I came across this in my readings in preparation when John Wesley began preaching on the book of Ecclesiastes he like myself today hadn't preached much through it before I preached a few verses from it here and there but never done a systematic study of this we're hoping to do God willing over these next weeks that's what John Wesley wrote in his diary having just begun that exercise of preaching from Ecclesiastes never before had I so clear a sight either of its meaning or beauties neither did I imagine that the several parts of it were in so exquisite a manner connected together all tending to prove the grand truth that there is no happiness out of God that there is no happiness apart from

God I pray that for myself as well as for yourselves it may also be so for us through studying the book of Ecclesiastes that we will come to know genuine true happiness and if we know it already that it may be multiplied in God in Christ may God bless these thoughts on his word to us we are going to conclude singing in psalm number 111 psalm 111 psalm 111 psalm that's page 391 tune is Kilmarnock and singing verses 6 to 10 that's page 391 he did the power of his works unto his people show when he the heathen heritage upon them did bestow his handiworks are truth and right all his commands are sure and done in truth and uprightness they evermore endure these verses he did the power he did the power of his works unto his people show he did the power of his works unto his people show peace by oh ...

All His commands are sure, Undone in truth and of brightness They evermore endure.

He's self-advancing to His home, His kaffled land for earth.

[34 : 25] In His kaffled, holy His name, And reverend is always.

With dawn's beginning is concealed, Will understanding may.

Of all that is the man's fulfilled, Is praise and your glory.

Well, just a reminder, please remain seated after the benediction. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

[35 : 32] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.