

Is There Meaning in Life?

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Turn with me to Ecclesiastes chapter 1. I, the preacher, have been king over Israel and Jerusalem, and I applied my heart to seek and search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after the wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said in my heart, I have acquired great wisdom surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge, and I applied my heart to no wisdom and to no madness and folly, and I perceive that this also is but a striving after the wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases in knowledge increases sorrow. I said in my heart, chapter 2, verse 1, come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, it is mad of pleasure. What use is it? I search with my heart how to cheer my body with wine, my heart still guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold of folly till I may see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forests of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had slaves who were born in my house. I also had great possessions of herds and flocks more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women and many concubines, the delight of the children of man. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. My wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. 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. Then, verse 11, I considered all that my hands had done and the toil that I had expended in doing it. And behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind. And there was nothing to be gained under the sun. May God bless the hearing and the preaching of His Word. Earlier this week, my son and I backpacked a section of the Appalachian Trail.

[3 : 53] On the second night, after a long day of hiking and many feet of elevation gain, if you're a hiker, you know what that means, we stumbled into a flat, quiet campground. Well, I mean, really a clearing in the woods.

But we stumbled upon a backcountry campground and we got some water and began to set up camp. Gradually, as we were setting up camp and making our dinner, delicious camp food dinner, a few thru-hikers stumbled into the same site. Thru-hikers is a nickname for all those folks who set out from Springer Mountain, Georgia in early April each year in hopes of hiking the 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail before October 15th when the park closes in Maine.

After eating dinner, we made a fire and gradually all the thru-hikers moseyed their way over to our fire. We got to know one another. I don't think we got any names, but we began talking. After spending weeks and weeks on the trail, it was obvious this moment of connection was very valuable to them as it was to us. After a while, I asked them, where are you going? Now, we all knew they were trying to get to Maine by October 15th. But I followed up and asked, why are you out here?

What are you looking for? One of them immediately said something like, everyone on the trail is looking for something.

One. And we are too. Two of the folks were a father-son combo. The son having just gotten out of rehab and the father having just retired.

[5 : 56] They are hiking together in hopes of finding and starting a new life of sobriety and freedom. I just immediately applauded him. Another was a veteran looking for peace after all he had seen and heard in Iraq.

A third or fourth was a lady whose brother died at 44 years old of a one-time use of fentanyl, leaving behind a wife and kids. Now she's 44.

And wants to find out what she lost when she lost him. As I sat around the fire, it was kind of seared in her mind. We're all looking for something.

We may not be on the AT. We may not have ever even packed a moving van. But everyone is going somewhere and everybody's looking for something.

We might be running from a childhood filled with a hall of horrors. Of abuse, neglect, and disgust. We might be searching for a father to stand in for the one who wasn't there.

[7 : 11] A mother to do the same. We might be hunting long nights and long days for a place to fit in, a place to belong, a place to not be alone anymore.

We might be looking for a reason to live. A reason to stop cutting. A reason to stop starving ourselves. A reason to stop pouring drugs into our body.

This morning, the preacher brings us into the very quest that we find our lives consumed with.

The search for meaning. It's an obvious, it's a personal search. Now you heard that as we went through 50 times he uses personal pronouns.

I, me, my. This personal search. This personal longing. It's a desperate search. Again and again he says, I plied my heart twice. He says, I said in my heart.

[8 : 14] Another time he says, I searched my heart. Like us, the search for meaning is not just something he does. The search for meaning is the only thing he does. And we're going to unpack his desperate search through several questions.

The first is, is there meaning, is the meaning of life in wisdom? Is the meaning of life in wisdom?

The preacher begins his search for meaning in life and wisdom.

And that shouldn't surprise us. We're in wisdom literature. In the Old Testament, one of the five books of wisdom. And so, and he's just the man for the job. This is King Solomon. As you probably know from reading your Bibles, at the beginning of his reign, he asked the Lord for wisdom.

The Lord said, you're asking for wisdom. I'm going to give you riches and possession in addition to wisdom. He is the wisest man who ever lived. And so, in verses 13 through 18, he tells us how he sought to find the meaning of life in wisdom.

In wisdom. Look in verse 13. He says, I applied my heart, that's that heart again, to seek and search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.

[9 : 33] So, though he's coming sincerely, I applied my heart. Now, in the Old Testament, the heart is not, the word, the heart, does not most often refer to the organ that pumps blood through your body.

The heart is what makes you, you. The heart is your hopes and fears, your longings, your frustration, your desire, your acts of love and obedience.

It's what makes people think about when you walk into a room. And so, the preacher, when he's referencing his heart, I applied my heart, he's saying, I'm not playing games. I'm putting it all on the line.

I'm completely sincere. Now, I'm playing it straight. I'm devoting everything to this search for meaning. He's sincere.

And he's exhausted. He said, I search out, seek and search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. Unlike the book of Proverbs that begins by saying, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the preacher sets out to test the theory, so to speak.

[10 : 46] He sets out to look with his own eyes, touch with his own hands, feel with his own, do his own investigation work to see if the meaning of life is found in wisdom.

I envision Solomon here as a young man, brimming with excitement, rushing off, maybe from a commencement ceremony into the world to figure out where is the good life and to learn all that he could to read and study, think and ponder and to seek insight on what the meaning of life is.

But what he finds when he searches out by wisdom is crushing. He finds, firstly, that wisdom does not fix life's brokenness. Wisdom does not fix life's brokenness.

The reality that we live in a fallen, broken world is not fixed by wisdom. The images are vivid. Look in verse 14. I've seen everything that's done under the sun and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

The entrance of that phrase that is repeated throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. All is vanity. All is broken. All is unfruitful, unproductive, unrewarding. All is vanity and a striving after the wind.

[11:57] You ever chase the wind? You ever seen the wind rustle through the leaves and tried to run it down? You know, you may be able to run with the wind for a few moments, but you can't catch it.

That's what he's saying. Chasing after the meaning of life with wisdom is like chasing the wind, trying to catch the wind.

I've seen everything done under the sun. I've come to realize that trying to make sense out of life is as fruitful as trying to chase the wind and catch the wind.

So he concludes with this proverb. Now that's fitting. This is Solomon. Proverb. What is crooked cannot be made straight. What is lacking cannot be counted.

This is the reality of life under the sun. There's a crookedness to life now. Life is twisted and cannot be straightened out.

[13:01] It cannot be bent back. It cannot be set right. Life is a bone out of place that forces you to limp. No orthopedist.

Can set it straight. What is, now what does that mean? What is lacking cannot be counted. What's lacking? What he's saying is you can't find everything to add it up.

Life no longer adds up. One plus one does not equal two because you lost one of the ones. I mean, you can't, there's always something missing. Life is crooked and broken and wisdom cannot set it right.

And so, the second thing he discovers is that wisdom only increases sorrow over life's brokenness. So, wisdom cannot be made right. It cannot fix life's brokenness.

And so, it only increases sorrow over it. So, wisdom does not straighten it out. So, I think what he says, the preacher keeps searching for the value of wisdom. So, if it doesn't straighten out life's brokenness, then surely it makes life's brokenness more bearable.

[14:09] an opiate to get through it. Look in verse 17, I apply my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.

So, I want to know wisdom in relation to folly. So, surely that must be where it is even though wisdom doesn't straighten things out. Maybe the value is that life becomes more bearable.

Maybe the brokenness of life becomes easier. The pain of life less harsh. The sorrow of life less heartbreaking. But this too, he says, is a striving after wind.

This is vanity. Pointless. Senseless. He includes again with a proverb, for in much wisdom is much vexation.

And he increases knowledge, increases in sorrow. Wisdom doesn't solve the problems of life. It increases our frustration and exasperation over them.

[15:09] growing in knowledge means growing in sorrow. That can't be right.

I mean, education is the key, right? You know, get a good job. Get good grades. Go to a good school. Get good grades.

Get a good job. Get your things in order and you'll have a good life. But the preacher says, it doesn't work that way. One professor, Eric Ortlin, teaches at a school in England.

He says, and I quote, when I teach Ecclesiastes, I tell my students that if their degree from Briarcrest makes their life easier, then the school has failed them.

Growing in wisdom and knowledge and understanding makes life harder, not easier. Now, there's a warning here. There's a danger in naive, unproven wisdom.

[16:18] Anybody can memorize the multiplication tables, but the proof is when you do the work. Anybody can memorize the Proverbs, but it's a lot harder to live them out under the sun.

Knowledge puffs up. Sometimes in our youth, we say, I know what I'm going to do with my life. Got it all planned out. I knew what I was going to do with my life.

I'm not doing anything what I planned to do when I graduated. You know, I know what I'm going to do. I know it better than my parents, those old folks. They don't know what's going on. I'm not going to settle for what they settle for.

I'm not going to stumble in the way they stumble, but growing in wisdom is harder than you think. Growing in wisdom doesn't silence the gnawing questions of doubt and despair. The questions, why did this happen to me? How could God allow this to happen to me? Memorizing all the verses, Bible verses, doesn't supply you with all the answers.

[17:19] Growing in wisdom and knowledge doesn't always lead to a promotion or remove your loneliness or lead to success or answer your prayers or save your dreams or erase your fears.

And when it doesn't, when it doesn't do those things, wisdom increases your sorrow. That's what it means. It leads to much vexation.

It increases sorrow. It makes it hurt more. Meaning of life and wisdom? No way. No way. David says, I've never seen the righteous suffer.

I have. Never seen the righteous go hungry. I have. Because this is east of Eden. Point two is the meaning of life and pleasure.

Once he finds out that life's meaning is not in wisdom, he turns to pleasure.

[18:24] He sets out to test his heart, to feel as much as he could feel out of life, taste as much as he could taste, to see if it unlocks the meaning of life under the sun. He finds out pretty quickly that life can be a lot of fun.

He tests, there's all sorts of pleasures that he tests himself. He tests himself with laughter, verse 2, food and drink, verse 3, art, verse 4, nature, verse 5 and 6, possessions, verse 7 and 8, music, verse 8, sex, verse 8, acclaim, applause, affirmation, verse 9, work, verse 11.

These are all the pleasures of the world. And he seeks to taste them and enjoy them. Look at verse 10. He says, 2 verse 10, he says, whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them.

I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil. This was the reward for all my toil. Zach Eswine says, the preacher basically tells us that life under the sun always has nine basic amusements available for us on its closet shelves.

Therefore, our options for a high under the sun always abound. But take note, the same old closet has offered these same nine games to every generation under the sun.

[19:52] These games are fun. They're very old and tattered and badly worn with use. He turns first to laughter.

Laughter. Ecclesiastes 3, 4 says, there's a time to laugh. Praise God. Laughter is a medicine for the soul. One author says, laughter gives language or gives expression to the language of joy.

I love that. Laughter is the language of joy. There's nothing quite like being doubled over laughing through the night around a bonfire or a board game or something like that.

You know, one person that really loved to laugh in my life was Jana's first husband, Kelly Thomas. Jana and her husband, Kelly, and their family were members of a church I used to pastor.

And the day Kelly died suddenly was a Sunday nearly seven years ago. That very day, me not knowing, none of us knowing what the rest of the day would ensue, I was coming into the bathroom as he was coming out.

[21:04] He stuck out his hand. I said, did you wash that thing? Immediately, split second later, he said, no, but I found a quarter down in the bottom of the commode.

And I just erupted with laughter and avoided his hand, you know? Laughter. Who doesn't love to laugh?

But laughter has a dark side. Jokes get old. Gatherings of the same old friends with the same old jokes bore and offend.

Jokes turn crude. Jokes mock too much. Jokes shrug off real problems. Jokes mask deep pain. It's now a stereotype. It's now commonplace to find immense brokenness and depression underneath the laugh-grabbing lives of comedians.

And so Solomon gets fed up. Laughter? It's mad. It's madness. There's no meaning in joking. It's a cover-up. It's a charade. It's a laugh track.

[22:19] It merely hides the pain and brokenness of life. Then he turns to food and drink. Verse 3, I search my heart how to cheer my body with wine.

My heart's still guiding me with wisdom. Ecclesiastes 10, 19, bread is made for laughter and wine gladdens life. Food and drink are wonderful gifts of God.

God has given us so much good food and so much good drink to enjoy. John Calvin says, God not only provides for man's necessity, but bestows upon them as much as is sufficient for the ordinary purposes of life.

That in His goodness, He deals still more bountifully with them by cheering their hearts with wine and oil. earlier this week when I was on that backpacking trip, a friend of mine let me have these bars that were just these green belly bars that were loaded with all the nutrition needed for one meal.

It was like 1,200 calories in one bar, but they tasted like sawdust. I was trying to dull them out. I was like, guys, you're going to get tired.

[23 : 39] You need one of my bars. You're going to be good. Trying to dull them out, but they tasted horrible and everybody began mocking those. Well, that's the way life could have been. God could have just given us some sawdust bars to sat it, but He didn't do that.

He gave Indian and Vietnamese and Korean and a big juicy burger and a T-bone steak. He gave us all these wonderful things to eat and wonderful things to drink, but food and drink are a lousy source of comfort.

A life of fine dining is a poor shelter from the pain of life. Too much of your favorite food leaves you bloated. Wine and beer are gifts from God, but buzzing to feel happy and unafraid is foolishness. Leaves us only empty. There's no meaning in food and drink. But Solomon does not stop. So he turns to those kind of immediate laugh track pleasures that mass pain and then he immediately gets productive. He gets industrious. He starts building houses and vineyards and gardens and possessions.

[24 : 55] He begins gathering all these external, tangible, industrious things. Now what's going on here? Like what is he talking about?

All these things he's built. Well, some scholars have pointed out the remarkable reoccurrence of these words in Genesis 1 and 2. He goes to plant like plants in Genesis 1-0, but he doesn't just plant things.

He makes for himself a garden like Genesis 1. He has fruit trees like the apple trees in the Garden of Eden. These trees are sprouting and growing. Eden figures out ways to irrigate to provide water for them in the way the waters came up and came back down in Genesis 1 and 2.

The preacher's not trying to escape the pain anymore. He's trying to recreate Eden. The preacher's trying to go back. He's running away from the brokenness of the world.

He's trying to build something new and perfect. He's trying to hermetically seal all this little area from the rest of the world that he might recreate the world as God has designed.

[26 : 03] And we're so vulnerable to the same temptation. In response to the brokenness of this life, we think the answer is constructing a self-contained life with all the good things in it.

We create our own little Eden and hope in it. We build our own kingdom. It may be gathering the possessions that we think mark a good life.

The car, the boat, the garden. It may be building the house tricked out in all the ways we want. I often tell my kids, my house will be in the new heavens and new earth. You know, my new car replacing that 2008 will be in the new heaven and new earth. It may be in climbing to a certain position that shows we have arrived.

It may just be an over-focus on our family. We're so vulnerable to chasing a good life that is here and now sealed off from everything that is broken.

[27 : 17] but like Babel, it'll never work. The ground will keep biting back. You can't seal off the brokenness of this world.

So be careful. When it doesn't satisfy, Solomon goes deeper. Maybe it's not monies and possessions that are the meaning of life. Maybe it's the meaning of life is being found and finding acclaim and applause.

Finding an audience, fans, admiration. Maybe it's not having things that is the meaning of life, but being known for having things, right? Being known for that person, being that guy, being the Joneses that other people look up to.

Maybe that's it. And so Solomon says, I became great. I surpassed all who were before me. And it may work for a little while, but in the end, it ends in nothing. Look in verse 11.

He said, I consider all that my hands had done and the toil that I expended in doing it. And behold, all was vanity and striving after wind and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

[28 : 33] Nothing. In 2002, just seven months before his death, at 71 years old, Johnny Cash recorded his final album.

One song stands out from all the rest of me. He covered a Nine Inch Nails song.

It's going to take a minute before I get to that. But he covered a Nine Inch Nails song called Hurt. The video, in my opinion, is the greatest music video of all time.

Kanye may disagree with me. The video was recorded in Cash's house in Nashville. All of his life is spliced into this video.

His humble beginnings. His wild, rebellious years. His many Grammys along the walls. Or in this case, his many golden records along the walls.

[29 : 37] His love, June Carter Cash. If you know anything about Johnny, you know about June. And Johnny, hollow with age and moving slowly, is singing this song.

In the most provoking scene, Johnny sits at a magnificent table set with caviar and lobster and silver. He pours out wine on the table.

His hand shaking with age, singing these words, What have I become, my sweetest friend? Everyone I know goes away in the end. You can have it all. My empire of dirt. My empire of dirt. If you're searching for meaning and the pleasures of this world, you might as well dig in the dirt. It's the meaning of life and pleasure.

[30 : 52] No. It's vanity. vanity. It's all vanity. Point three, is there meaning in life?

Is there meaning in life? What do we say after all that? What are we to make of this massive search and a return home empty handed?

What are we to make? Are we just stuck in a broken world filled with empty pleasure? If this is all the text says, this is all Solomon has to offer me, I'm going home. Yes, there's meaning in life.

I think Solomon is looking back on his life. Solomon, and if we listen clearly, we can hear what Solomon is trying to say. Life is like chasing the wind when you try to figure it out on your own.

Life is like chasing the wind when you try to figure it out on your own. This is Solomon's mistake 50 times in 18 verses. He uses I, me, my. He wasn't seeking wisdom and understanding from God.

[31 : 57] He was on his own quest. He was on his own search. Life cannot be figured out that way. It's only vexation and frustration and increased sorrow if you figure it out on your way.

The brokenness of life is not meant to push us to keep trying to put life back together. The brokenness of life is meant to lead us to come humbly to God.

Solomon is telling us about the search that he set out on and came back empty not because there's no meaning in life but because he came, he went out and came back empty because meaning is only found in God.

There's a poem we have for you that I think captures this wonderfully and I read this in Brit Lit right after being converted and it totally blew my mind. Still does 20 years later by George Herbert called The Pulley.

We have it for you. He says, When God had first made man, having a glass of blessing stand by, let us, said he, pour on him all we can.

[33 : 04] Let the world's riches which dispersed lie, contract into a span. A big span of riches. A buffet.

So strength first made a way, then beauty flow, then wisdom, honor, pleasure. When almost all was out, God made a stay.

Stop. Perceiving that alone of all his treasure, rest in the bottom lay. So he gives out everything except rest.

He continues, for if I should, said he, now I know this is English we don't normally use in the poem, but if I should, said he, bestow this jewel of rest also on my creature, he will adore my gifts instead of me and rest in nature, not the God of nature.

So both should losers be. He gives out rest. They rest in that. God loses and you do too.

[34 : 17] He says, let him keep the rest, play on words, keep all the other treasures, but keep them with repining restlessness. Let him be rich and weary, that at least if goodness lead him not, yet weariness may toss him to my breast.

I think that gets it. There's so much beauty in this world. But it's not meant to be a dead end.

It's meant to be whispers of a so much more beautiful world that lies on the other side. famously, as Augustine says, for you have made us for yourselves and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

But God does, God makes us restless in finding rest in anything else but himself. But there's more we see more clearly than Solomon.

We see the one who Solomon was pointing to. Someone greater than Solomon has come, the true king, the better king, the wiser king, our Lord Jesus Christ has come.

[35 : 37] If Solomon could find meaning in life in fearing God, how much more can we who know him who relinquish eternal glory to live life under the sun?

Him who, confounding the wisdom of this world, came not to ascend an earthly throne but to bear that old foolish cross. The ones who know him who bore in his body on the tree all the wrath deserve for thrill seekers, glory seekers, and lovers of self.

Folks like you and me, we know him who after death rose again and has now hidden us in him that come what may in this world or our life, we are completely and eternally secure in him.

We know him who came after us shouting, come back to me. Come find life and rest. What is the meaning of life?

What is the meaning of life in this fallen world with empty pleasures? Christ is the meaning of life. Run to him. Cling to him. Rejoice in him. That's what Solomon's trying to say.

[36 : 42] Run to him. Cling to him. Rejoice. Christ is the meaning of life. Now I don't mean Christ is the meaning of life like a plastic smile you paste on your face when you're walking through hell.

I do not mean that. I mean Christ is the meaning of life because life and rest and joy and peace are in him alone.

I mean Christ is the meaning of life because there's only one friend that matters. There's only one friend that I don't know what else to tell. I'm 42 years old.

Everything, everything, everything leaves me thirsty but Christ never does. Christ restores and renews and he forgives and he sets me free.

What a friend we have in Jesus Christ. Do you have a friend in him? Do you know him? Do you walk with him?

[37 : 51] I was telling my wife, we were sitting out last night at the UT Marina looking over the lake and I said honey, I think this has been the hardest year in my life but Christ is sweeter than he's ever been.

He's the only friend, I mean I need other friends but this one, I need other friends that point me to this friend. Do you have that type of friend? What a friend we have in Jesus but only if you know him.

Do you know him? Do you really?

I don't want to be unsure on whether I know Jesus Christ. Do you walk with him? does he walk with you? You can have Jesus Christ as your friend this morning.

[39 : 18] I mean for real. closer than a brother. Closer than a mother or father, any of these things. If you're not a Christian, I want you to come to Jesus Christ.

He's the only one that can say come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I'll give you rest. everyone else offers anxious toil.

If you're a Christian, I'd encourage you to take this passage and search your heart. One of the purposes of Ecclesiastes is to do a little heart therapy.

Is there anything that I've begun to love too much? Are there any areas where I'm building my own kingdom for my own glory?

Anything I'm loving too much or wanting too much? Commend that to you. Let us pray. Father in heaven, thank you that there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

[40 : 47] Jesus says greater love has no one than this that I lay down my life for my friends. Lord, we praise you and worship you that we have a friend who is not just a friend but is our Lord and Savior and our greatest treasure who knows us by name and has written our names on the palms of his hand.

We rest in you, we trust in you, we lean on you. In Jesus' name, amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.