

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.

You can turn with me to Ecclesiastes 2, or actually Ecclesiastes 1. We're going to continue our series on Ecclesiastes this morning.

Amen. It's a joy to worship together, a joy to celebrate all that Christ has done for us, and all he's doing in the midst of our body.

If you don't have a copy of the scriptures, we'd love to get you one. So you can just raise your hand, and we have a copy of the scriptures for you, or they are in the back if you need them as well.

Well, Ecclesiastes is a wonderful book of the Bible, as Bill introduced it to us last week. And philosopher Peter Kreef says, Ecclesiastes is the greatest of all books on philosophy.

[1 : 07] Now my guess is, I hope it's not a critical judgment, you're not an expert in philosophy, right? Nor am I. I don't know what you think about when you hear the word philosophy. Maybe you think of old men in long robes reclining together and pondering existence.

Or perhaps you think of modern-day academics pontificating about the origin and meaning of life. Why is there something and not nothing?

I listened to a talk last evening that began with that question. How does life begin? Does it just big bang into existence? Or did we evolve from some lesser life form?

Or perhaps when you hear the word philosophy, you just think of one of those pointless college majors that doesn't make any money, as Bill reminded us last week.

Either way, when we think about philosophy, I think we most often think about discussions and deliberations detached from reality. We think of ideas and theories that have little basis and value in daily life.

[2 : 17] But in Ecclesiastes, we encounter something entirely different. Yes, the preacher, yes, Solomon is undoubtedly focused on the questions of philosophy, on the meaning of life, on the purpose of life.

And yet, Solomon is not writing for the academics. He's not writing for the ivory tower, as they say. He's not discussing theoretical questions.

Solomon is writing to folks like you and me. Solomon's exploring the meaning and purpose of life in our fallen and often perplexing world.

Solomon's philosophy is for real life. Solomon's philosophy is for the man who switched careers three times, just longing to get beyond scraping by.

Solomon's for the youth rushing out into the world, yet naive about what lies ahead. Solomon's philosophy is for the family waylaid again with bad news, grasping for something to hold on to.

[3 : 24] Solomon's philosophy is for anyone who has stopped themselves in their tracks and muttered and moaned, what's this life for? What's this all about?

What's going on? Where am I headed? It's philosophy for real life in a fallen world.

It has a message for us. It has a message for each and every one of us this morning. Solomon began last week, as Bill read, and exhorted us, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

But in our text this morning, he takes us back in time, as it were, to his days as the king and his search for meaning in life.

Look with me at verse 12. He writes, 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.

[4 : 27] It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I've seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and is striving after the wind.

What is crooked cannot be made straight. And what is lacking cannot be counted. I said in my heart, I've 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.

I perceive that this also is but a striving after the wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation. And he increases knowledge, increases sorrow.

He continues, I said in my heart, come now, I will test you with pleasure. Enjoy yourself. But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, it is mad.

[5 : 27] I said of pleasure, what use is it? I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine, my heart still guided me with wisdom, and how to lay hold of folly till I might 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 forest 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.

And so, verse 9, I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. And my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them.

[6 : 35] 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 then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it.

And behold, all was vanity and a striving after the wind. And there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

Now, this morning, we're going to dive into this passage. And we're going to track with King Solomon as he takes us in this quest to find meaning in life.

We're not going to begin with a main point this morning. Hopefully, we're going to work towards one that will land on us as we unpack this passage. I'm going to break it out in three points.

First is, is life's meaning in wisdom? Is life's meaning in wisdom? King Solomon sets out to look for meaning in wisdom at the very beginning, and he's just the man to do it.

[7 : 46] If you know your scriptures back in 1 Kings, you probably know the story about him. After he becomes king, he prays to God for wisdom. And the Lord was so pleased with his prayer that he made him the wisest man, it says, who ever lived and who ever would live.

Wiser than anyone before him, wiser than anyone after him. And people came from all nations just to hear his wisdom. Maybe he pontificated, and they enjoyed hearing his wisdom.

And so he tells us, he kind of rolls back the time a little bit and tells us how he sought to find meaning of life in wisdom. Verse 13, he says, I applied my heart to seek and search out by wisdom. You know, he applied his heart. It just means he sincerely and devotedly pursued this thing. He did it in a comprehensive way.

He went to seek and to search out by wisdom the meaning of life. Many ways I envision Solomon as a youth here. Brimming with excitement and with all his high school classes, he rushes out in the world to see and to learn all that he can learn.

[9 : 02] To read, to study, to think, and ponder, to seek insight into the meaning of life. He has this optimism, the optimism that we associate so often with youth.

But what he discovers is crushing. First, he discovers that wisdom does not change reality.

The reality that we live in a fallen world and everything in it is broken is not changed by wisdom.

Now, these images are vivid. Look with me in 14.

He says, I've seen everything that is done under the sun and behold, all is vanity and a striving after the wind. What he's saying is life is like chasing the wind.

You ever heard the wind rustle through? I was typing on my computer yesterday afternoon and the wind just blew a chair over right next to me. You ever tried to chase it down? Ever tried to apprehend it?

[10 : 01] Ever tried to redirect it? Ever tried to control it? The wind rushes and we're unable to catch it. We're unable to control it. You know, we have a phrase that's similar to this in our

vocabulary that it's like herding cats.

I don't know about you fathers, but when mom is home, things are running smoothly. But when she leaves, it's hyper-focused game time, you know?

I mean, like I get one kid started on something, maybe Rev started on his homework. Next thing I know, Wren announces that Knox is about to tumble down the stairs. So I say, stop him quick! Run and get Knox.

All the while, Wren may have five questions that she wanted to ask me or maybe she spilt something or maybe she wanted to run downstairs or change into a princess outfit or something like that. All the while, Rev's over here hanging out asking questions.

It can be like herding cats. Once you get them in a circle, one jumps out. Once you get them in the bed and go put the other one in bed, that one comes out of bed to come visit and say goodnight to the other one.

[11:07] And it can feel like herding cats. I know you dads can agree. What he's saying is that life is like that. It's impossible to hold on to.

It's impossible to keep up with. Think of the image of spinning plates that we run to and try to spin and keep spinning. It's not what it could have been, not what it was designed to be, but after the fall, it is what it is.

And wisdom doesn't change. But he found out. So he continues what, in verse 15, he says, what is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

Now, this is the reality of life under the fall, after the fall and under the sun. Life is not merely impossible to control. He takes it one step further.

He says, it is broken. It's twisted. There's a crookedness to life after. The fall can't be straightened out.

[12:22] It's crooked cannot be made straight. It cannot be fixed. It can't be put back together. That's why we have that slide like that because we're trying to put together all these pieces of life together.

What is lacking cannot be added up. He's just saying, life no longer adds up. You can imagine a little kid learning to add, learning simple addition.

He has five blocks. He has four blocks, but they never equal ten blocks. That's what he's saying. You can have five blocks, and you can have four blocks, but they'll always equal nine blocks.

There'll always be something missing. What he's saying is that life after the fall and in the fallen world, diligence and faithfulness do not always equal fruitfulness. Obedience and church attendance and doing all the right things do not equal a carefree life.

Life no longer makes sense. Ever felt like that? It felt like that makes sense.

[13:29] I've been serving in secret. Here she came along. Johnny come lately and worked in this job for six months, and she got the promotion. I've been a faithful wife.

And then suddenly he decides he no longer wants in this marriage. Or maybe you've been trusting the Lord in singleness, and you've watched the wedding and the festivities come and come and come for all your friends while you've waited there as a bridesmaid, but never a bride.

Life doesn't add up. And we know this all together well. One commentator says we all live east of Eden now. And wisdom can't change it.

He keeps going. He doesn't stop with the brokenness of the world. He keeps searching. But what he finds out also is just as hard. He finds out that wisdom increases sorrow. So he says I set out to know wisdom positively, but also to know it in comparison to madness and folly.

So he thought, I mean, he must have thought, surely, the difference wisdom must make is in its comparison with folly. Right? That must be what it is. If wisdom doesn't find the meaning of life, well, the meaning of life must be found in its comparison to folly and that.

[15:05] But this too, he finds it's like chasing the wind. He concludes in this little poetry line for him, much wisdom is much vexation. He increases knowledge, increases sorrow.

Much wisdom brings vexation. That's probably not a word you used last week, nor did I. The idea is wisdom brings this irritation and frustration and annoyance that brims on the verge of anger.

wisdom brings not peace but a brimming frustration. Well, mom, you say, ignorance is bliss.

Now, I doubt that was the best parenting practice, but eventually she'd heard so much about what we were doing on Friday and Saturday night that she just didn't want to hear anymore.

She said, okay, okay, okay, don't tell me I can't take it. Why? Because the more we know, the more trouble it brings, right?

[16:09] The more it keeps us up at night. The more it keeps us on our knees. And this is what Solomon found out. The wisdom that he pursued and sought to find the meaning of life only increased his sorrow, his agony, his heart-breaking scam of this world.

Is the meaning of life in wisdom? No. Thankfully, he doesn't stop here. He keeps going. His point two is life's meaning in pleasure.

Is life's meaning in pleasure? Now, once he found that life's meaning wasn't in wisdom, he must have thought, surely life's meaning must be in pleasure.

If I can't escape it by wisdom or can't correct it by wisdom, then surely I can just ease through it with pleasure. And so he sets out to test pleasure, to test him.

What he means by that is he just wants to see him. He wants to experience him. He wants to feel him like sticking the proverbial foot in the pool. He wants to know what they taste and feel like. He wants to know these pleasures.

[17:22] He finds out life under the sun is a lot of fun. Pleasures abound. As they say, let the good times roll.

And he finds all sorts of pleasures. He finds laughter. He finds food and drink, art, nature, and the things he constructed around his house.

He finds money and possessions, great wealth. He finds music. Isn't that great? Music. We all love music. He finds sex. Many concubines that he says are the delight of the children of man.

He finds acclaim, affirmation. He finds work. He finds things to put his hand to. These are the pleasures of the world. These are the pleasures under the sun.

That's what he's saying. This is all the pleasure under the sun. He said he sought to taste it and enjoy it all. Look at verse 10. He says, Now you may, you finance guys may be thinking, how did he fund all this?

[18:32] Well, he was immensely wealthy. Money proved to be no obstacle. Zach S. Wine 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.

These games are fun, but they're very old and tattered and badly worn with use. He throws his life and he finds laughter.

Ecclesiastes 3 says, There's a time to laugh and amen. I mean, who doesn't need a laugh? One commentator said, Laughter gives expression to the language of joy.

I love that. Laughter is the language of joy. How often do you feel like you just can't even express it, but you're doubled over laughing? You know, one of the things I love about the internet, and there's a lot of hate about the internet, so this is not in this sermon, but one of the things I love about the internet is its uncanny ability to produce and spread funny things.

[20:05] I mean, they just go viral. You didn't even know this stuff happened. It's amazing. And you know, one of the things that are just amazing is GIFs. One, several years ago, our admin staff, our admin ladies, were all about sending GIFs of cats around the office.

Now, we kind of found this out later, but I mean, it was beyond just something they casually did. It became pretty much a preoccupation. one of the ones we stumbled upon was of Shaq and this cat that I just could not stop laughing at and could not stop watching.

Let's see this. Oh, yeah. Yeah. That's probably good.

Or you can just keep it going behind me, you know. Great things about GIFs, they just keep playing over and over and over again.

You get to enjoy it. Next time Mama says there's lasagna to dinner, maybe just text that her way.

Say, oh, yeah, Mom, I'm ready. Bring me some garlic bread, too.

[21:28] Oh, yeah. But you know, laughter has another side. Jokes get old.

You know, gatherings of old friends are the same old jokes. They bore. At times, they even offend. Jokes turn crude.

They go too far. They mock too much. jokes shrug off the real problem and mask real pain.

You know, it's now become commonplace to see the brokenness and depression hidden in the laughing life of comedians. It's tragic.

This face on the stage and this laughter on the stage conceals a broken life. and Solomon gets fed up with laughter.

[22 : 31] Look down at verse 2. He said, I said of laughter, it's mad. It's mad. It's not funny. There's no meaning in joking is what he's saying. It's mad.

It's this cover-up. It merely conceals the pain and brokenness of life. It doesn't help. It doesn't find the meaning. So, too, it's a warning to us.

teenagers that can never be serious beneath the jesting and joking and mocking don't understand laughter.

They're fools. Father that merely jokes and mocks all the time is missing it. There's something more here. He turns to food and drink.

He continues after laughter and dives into food and drink. Bread is made for laughter and wine gladdens life. Food and drink are wonderful pleasures. I love food.

[23 : 30] One of my favorite gifts from God and I enjoy eating it. But food and drink are lousy sources of comfort and security. Fine dining is a poor shelter from the pain of life.

Too much favorite food? Too much of your favorite food? You know, you eat too much at birthday dinner? What's it doing? It's not satisfying. Almost sickening.

So too, wine and beer are gifts from God yet buzzing to feel happy and unafraid and comfortable deceives and leaves us thirsty and empty.

There's no meaning in food and drink. Perhaps that's what he means when he says eat and drink for tomorrow you die because there's no meaning in it and there's no meaning in life.

That's what he's talking about? I remember when I, before I became a Christian, I came to the University of Tennessee and lived two years here before becoming a Christian.

[24 : 36] And during my second year, I just remember enjoying this gift, this liberty at that time of drinking and every night would kind of begin with promise.

I would kind of want to enjoy this thing, you know, I may kind of lay out my drinks for the evening or pick up a 12-pack or something like that. It began with promise. I'd kind of press into the night expecting to enjoy, expecting to satisfy me, you know.

I'd go out and I'd be with friends. I'd hang with friends. I remember one particular night and began like all the others, consuming far too much alcohol in my home and then kind of going out into what was going on that night.

And I counted these guys as friends and then as the night went on, one of them just got belligerently drunk and got in a fight with the other one.

Like one in the morning, and I'm standing there watching one pounce the other one into the pavement and I'm sick. I was far from the Lord.

[25 : 48] I went back to my room and I just, I just cried. I said, Lord, I don't know what I've, I don't know if I've prayed, but I just, surely this cannot be life.

This cannot be all life is cracked up to be. This can't be the meaning of life. Is this all there is? You know, I just felt like I was scratching on the wall and there was something over there that I just could not get to outside of Christ.

These pleasures failed me and left me empty. And I felt caught in this trap of again and again falling back into the same promising evening that began and then ended with despair.

I love, if you find yourself there this morning in a wonderful place, pray God might open your eyes to these truths. Solomon kept going, you know, he didn't stop with just food and drink, didn't stop with laughter, he turned to bigger and better things, he got to bigger houses, he got vineyards, he got gardens, he got parks, possessions galore, and then he got concubines and above them all, he got acclaim.

He got affirmation. You know, affirmation is a powerful and wonderful thing. It's affirming to see something good happen as a result of your work.

[27 : 14] It brings great pleasure to be loved by other people, to be wanted in a helpful way. It feels good to be encouraged, but affirmation, just like laughter, just like food and drink, has a darker side.

That's what he's finding out. It's a simple affirmation, no longer satisfied. We want more. We want more honor. We want more esteem. We want to be famous.

We want more pay, more prominence, and nothing is ever enough. You know, in our age of social media and instant praise, there is no more seductive pleasure.

Would you have the seat of highest honor? Would you have the respect of thousands, the praise of thousands more? It would never, ever, ever satisfy.

It never was meant to. That's what he's finding out. It's thoroughly depressing in that moment. You know, in 2002, just seven short months before his death at age 71, Johnny Cash recorded his final album.

[28 : 30] One song stands out above the rest for me. He recorded a cover of Nine Inch Nails' song, Hurt.

The video of Kanye, I would probably disagree, is in my opinion, the greatest video of all time. You know, it was recorded back in Johnny Cash's house in Nashville, and all the artifacts were included. You know, so he had golden records on the wall, he had this immense wooden table. He had these images of his humble beginnings, and then his later success.

He had the images of his rebellion, and then the foreground so often was his love, June Carter Cash. And there, and through different sequences, was Johnny Cash himself.

71 years old, trembling a bit with age, yet singing these words in a completely different way.

[29 : 42] In the most probing scene of the video, and I would, I'd encourage all of you to check out that video. The most probing scene, he pours out wine on this magnificent table set with lobster and caviar and silver china.

And he says, what have I become? My sweetest friend, talking to his wife, everyone I know. The table's empty now. Everyone I know goes away in the end.

He says directly at the camera, and you can have it all. My empire of dirt. The greatest country singers of all time.

His last video, not him showing off the storehouses of his wealth, but him pouring out wine saying, you can have it. Just take it.

That's the message of Ecclesiastes. It's all dirt. It's worthless. You know, verse 2, he says, what a pleasure.

[30 : 52] What use is it? What does it actually give? What does it actually gain? What's the payoff? What's the payoff? Nothing.

Verse 11, he concludes, all was vanity and a striving after the wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

There's no meaning in pleasure. That's what he's saying. There's no meaning in it. There's no lasting satisfaction. So, point three, is there any meaning then in life?

I mean, what do we say? I mean, this is a hard message, right? It's a hard message. What do we make of all this? Is it take away? Is it just meaningless?

Are we just stuck in this broken, uncontrollable world filled with empty pleasures? Is this all the text has to say to us? If it does, I want to go home. It says no.

[32 : 04] It doesn't say that. Life is like chasing the wind when you try to figure it out on your own. This is Solomon's mistake.

50 times in these 18 verses. He says, I, me, my, myself. 50 times. I, me, my, myself. I, me, my, myself.

Solomon was not after wisdom. He was not after understanding from God. He was on his own quest. He was going out solo. Life's not meant to be figured out that way.

That's what he's going to reveal to us in the rest of the book. But even hints to here, life is not meant to be guided and controlled and governed by us. Some of you this morning have come up against life.

You've come up against your pursuits. You've kind of found dead end after dead end after dead end in your relationships and your pursuits, perhaps, in your career.

[33 : 06] And what Solomon is trying to say to you is that life is not meant to be figured out that way. Life is found in humbling ourselves before God, in fearing Him, in relinquishing control of our lives, in trusting His providential care and resting in His wisdom.

This is what Solomon found out. He's satisfied with it. This is not the message that Bill reminded us last week of a cynic, of someone who just grew old and disgruntled and just became cynical.

That's not the message. He went out searching for satisfaction and he satisfied what he found. But there's more. We see more clearly than Solomon.

Life is not found in our wisdom. Life is not found in a mass of pleasures or in the abundance of possession. Life is found in Christ.

Christ. This is who Solomon was pointing to. Someone greater than Solomon has come. Our Lord Jesus Christ.

[34 : 18] This is what he, this is a message he's hitting that in through this passage. This is the thing he wants to say to us that Solomon can learn to trust in God's wisdom. How much more are we? How much more can we? How much more are we invited to?

We know Him who relinquished His eternal glory to live with us under the sun. We know Him who confounding the wisdom of this world came not to ascend an earthly throne but to bear a foolish cross.

We know Him who bore in His body on that tree all the wrath deserved for pleasure seekers, glory seekers, and lovers of self. Folks like you and me. We know Him who after death rose again and ascended to the Father and now we know Him who has hidden our lives in Him.

We know Him so that we can say, come what may, my life, all that really matters is eternally and completely secure in Christ.

What's the meaning of life? What's the meaning of life in this fallen, uncontrollable world filled with empty pleasures? Christ is the meaning of life.

[35 : 25] That's what he's pointing to. Christ is the meaning of life. Oh beloved, run to Him, cling to Him, rejoice in Him. His wisdom will become yours.

His wisdom that's above your wisdom, your thoughts are not His thoughts, my thoughts are not His thoughts, my ways are not His ways, your ways are not His ways and His wisdom becomes yours. As you relinquish control, say, Lord, I hide in Christ. His security becomes yours.

This is the one who has all authority in heaven and on earth. Think He's worried? Think things are spun out of control? He says, come, hide in me.

His peace becomes your peace. peace. In the midst of shifting circumstances, we find peace. His purpose becomes your purpose.

[36 : 34] His life hides yours. And there's room enough for you. If you come in this morning and you've come up against this passage and you feel this passage kind of reading the mail of your life and reading the ways in which you've fallen for pleasures that have proved out to be empty, well, there's room enough for you to run from those pleasures that are only empty and only lead you away to come to Christ.

That's the glorious news of the gospel is that today can be the day of salvation. The gospel's offered up to you so that you can respond in faith and come and cling and cleave wholly unto Christ. That's the key to life. There's room for you. So in conclusion, how do we live now?

Right? That's the \$64,000 question as Bill likes to say. How do we live now? Well, when we find our life in Christ, only then it begins to make sense.

Not completely. We find in Him peace amidst shifting circumstances.

[38 : 03] In Him we find courage to pick up love one more time. and angle it towards those in our life. In Him we find hope to believe the best is yet to come.

In Him we find joy in the gifts He's given us under the sun. Striking thing about this list of pleasures, striking thing about wisdom in this world is not that it's completely meaningless, meaningless.

It's just not an ultimate meaning of life. So Zach S1 writes the best good in the madness under the sun is found when we recover some small resemblance of what we are made for in Eden.

Fellowship with God, a life before His face. God created us. His good gifts remain for our joy. Counterfeit God's forged advantages and illusory pleasures now abound like weeds bent on choking out the flower bed.

Everything is without meaning now but there are flowers that still bloom. These leftover beauties that do not quit.

[39 : 27] These small voices that give witness still to the moaning world. In Christ we find the joy to embrace these leftover beauties.

The beauties of relationships, friends, of nature, of so many things, of food and drink and all these things. These beauties keep on coming and they keep whispering and keep witnessing that the best is yet to come.

Find refuge in Christ. Their message is clear. God is real and alive. Madness is not all there is. Life is hidden in Christ.

Father in heaven, we come to you and we hide in you. But we do not understand all these things, but we do draw near to you to cling wholly unto Christ.

Lord, he is our savior. He is our friend. He is our treasure. Everything pales in comparison to him. The deepest desire of our hearts is to know him and the power of his resurrection, to walk in the newness of life he provides, to live for the eternity that awaits us and hope and your promise to make all things new.

[40 : 58] We pray that you'd help us today. Fill our hearts with faith. In Christ's 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. Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth Pr deth