

THE MEANING OF LIFE, Part 1

ECCLESIASTES 1-2

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According to this month's issue of *Readers' Digest*, the tragic events that have been occurring during the last six months have caused a lot of people to begin wondering about the meaning of life. Many people living in the United States have sacrificed an awful lot to live the American dream, and now a lot of these people are asking the question, "Is it really worth it?" For many, the answer to this question is a resounding "No!"

According to a non-scientific survey that I have personally conducted over the past decade, when it comes to how people feel about the meaning of life, there are four different categories of thinking. First, there are those who believe life is meaningful, but the standards they use to measure the meaning of life are things like wealth and education and health and happiness. These standards are clearly observable with the naked eye. Whether or not people have these things and how much they have of these things is something that can be measured.

The second category of people is the group who believes that life is meaningful, but they don't know why. Most of these people are really no different from the people in the first group I just mentioned, because subconsciously they are using the same observable standards to measure the meaning of life. They just don't realize that they are. These people go along with the crowd and are too busy to take the time to consider whether or not their lives are meaningful until some personal tragedy forces them to think about the question.

The third category of people is the group that thinks life is meaningless. This group can be divided into two subgroups, those who think they would be better off dead and those who are searching for the true meaning of life.

And then the final category of people of people are those who use a high standard to measure the meaningfulness of life. It is a standard that is hard to observe or define or measure. People who belong to this group love truth. They have discovered that an intimate, personal relationship with God is the only thing that can make life meaningful. God is truth, and a personal relationship with God is not something that we can easily define by using objective standards; however, such a relationship is the only thing that makes life meaningful. This is the thinking of the people who belong to this category.

The goal of this sermon and the next two sermons I preach is to convince everyone that, apart from a relationship with God, life is indeed meaningless. Actually, the person who has come to the conclusion that life is meaningless is in a better state than the person who thinks life is meaningful but doesn't know why. And the person who thinks life is meaningless is also in a better state than the person who is convinced that his health or wealth or happiness is the thing that makes his life meaningful.

The scripture I will use to prove that life without God is meaningless is the Old Testament book of ECCLESIASTES. ECCLESIASTES 1:1 tells us that this book was written by a king in Jerusalem who was the son of David. Most Bible teachers agree that King Solomon wrote this book, and that it was written at the end of his life.

The book begins in verse 2 with a proposition that I believe to be correct. "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." Of course, verse two must be understood in light of verse three which says, "What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?"

It is life "under the sun," that is life apart from God, which is being considered here, and the conclusion Solomon comes to is that life under the sun is utterly meaningless.

Solomon first proves his point by arguing from his own experiences. These arguments can be found in chapters one and two of Ecclesiastes. Then, beginning in chapter three and ending in chapter eight, the king uses his observations to argue the same point. And finally, in the section of scripture that begins with chapter 9 and ends with chapter 11, King Solomon gives worldly wisdom that is intended to help the reader reduce the amount of suffering and hardship he will face in a life that is meaningless. It isn't until chapter 12, the very last chapter, that King Solomon presents us with another way of looking at life. That chapter begins with the words, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth." At the end of the chapter, we see the final conclusion to everything is that we should "fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."

Today we are going to limit ourselves to the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes where the author draws upon his own experiences to prove his point.

There is one general observation that is recorded in verses 4-11 of chapter 1. It is that generations come and go; the sun rises and sets; the wind never stops blowing; and the water from streams never stops flowing. In other words, life

continues to grind on, without stopping. We will look at this general observation, along with some others, next week. This week I want to concentrate on the experiments King Solomon did with his own life in an attempt to find meaning in life.

The first experiment had to do with education. In verse 13 Solomon testifies that he devoted himself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is under the sun. Notice here that the education that Solomon is talking about limits itself to things that are under the sun. In other words, King Solomon did not include the study of God in his attempt to find meaning in life. For this part of his experiment, he left God out of the equation.

I remember visiting the home of Thomas Jefferson. During that visit I was impressed by the great emphasis Jefferson placed on education. Because of his passion for education, new schools were established and the United States became a country that places a high value on education. But the thing that impressed me the most as I visited the rooms where this great man once sat was the Bible that he read and studied every day. Jefferson realized that if education did not include the study of God, then it would become meaningless and even harmful.

Unfortunately, many people have forgotten this truth. They seek to gain all sorts of knowledge, except the knowledge of God. King Solomon tried it and concluded that it was meaningless.

There has never been a time like the present where education is available to the masses. But there has never been a time like the present where so many young people in our society experience very high levels of stress. The more we increase knowledge, the more we increase grief. This is not true if our worldly knowledge is balanced with knowledge of God. But it certainly is true if God is excluded from our studies.

The second experiment King Solomon conducted in his attempt to discover the meaning of life was to seek pleasure. Ecclesiastes 2:1 records the king as saying, "I thought in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.'"

The words that follow emphasize the fact that King Solomon decided not to deny himself of any pleasure. And, being a king, he could do whatever he wanted. All the food and all the women and all the material pleasures that a person could desire were his for the taking. King Solomon overindulged in all of these things to find meaning in life, but his experiment failed to find anything meaningful. He said that it all proved to be meaningless.

There was once a man named Howard Hughes who, at the age of 45, was one of the most glamorous men in America. He courted actresses, piloted exotic test aircraft, and worked on top-secret CIA contracts. He owned a string of hotels around the world and even an airline. Twenty years later, at the age of 65, Howard Hughes still had plenty of money—\$2.3 billion, to be exact. But the world's richest man had become one of the most pathetic. He lived in small, dark rooms atop his hotels, without sun and without joy. He spent most of his time watching movies over and over, with the same movie showing as many as 150 times. He lay naked in bed, deathly afraid of germs. Life held no meaning for him. Finally, emaciated and hooked on drugs, he died at the age of 67.

Howard Hughes and King Solomon are extreme examples of people who tried to find meaning in the pleasures of life but failed. At the end of his life, King Solomon concluded that indulging in pleasure alone doesn't make life meaningful.

Worldly knowledge and wisdom alone do not make life meaningful and pleasure alone does not make life meaningful. And so a third experiment is now in order. Let's try a combination of the two. Solomon tried that. In Ecclesiastes 2:12 Solomon writes, "Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom and also madness and folly." And what is the conclusion of this experiment? In verse 13 Solomon concludes that wisdom seems better than folly. But, in the end, both are meaningless.

The effort King Solomon put into all his experiments failed to help him find what he was looking for. He was looking for meaning in life, but he failed to find it. So, in ECCLESIASTES 2:17 he says, "So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

If we only consider the things under the sun, things like wealth and health and long life and emotional pleasure and education, then we will fail to find true meaning in life. What Solomon is saying to us in the first two chapters of ECCLESIASTES is, "From my experience, I have found this to be true."

So what should a person do if he comes to this conclusion? Well, for the person who does not despair life, there are really only two options. First is to begin looking somewhere else for meaning in life. Look beyond the sun and find God. The other option is to muddle through this meaningless life in the best way possible. In other words, try to live in a way that will produce the least amount of anxiety. We call this "pursuing worldly wisdom."

At the end of ECCLESIASTES chapter 2, Solomon offers us worldly wisdom

to help reduce the amount of pain in a meaningless world. Later on we will take a more detailed look at worldly wisdom. Today I will just give you an introduction.

One bit of worldly wisdom comes from the conclusion found in verse 16. The conclusion states that it does not matter whether we are rich or poor, good or bad, because, in the end, we are all going to die and be forgotten. The worldly wisdom that helps us cope with this fact of life sounds like this, “Don’t be so up tight, you’re only going to die.” When I was growing up, I remember my mother using these words when she saw her children get upset. She would say, “Calm down, you’re only going to die.” My aunt once told me that the older and closer to death she gets, the more laid back she becomes. The things that used to upset her no longer upset her, because she knows that she is only going to die in the end.

This is why, given the choice, it is better to spend more time and energy pursuing education than pleasure. Why? Not because education makes life meaningful; rather, it is because the pursuit of pleasure will bring us more anxiety. So it is better to choose the thing that will cause the least amount of stress. The whole point of worldly wisdom is to teach us how to reduce stress.

Another bit of worldly wisdom can be found in ECCLESIASTES 2:24-26. In these verses God is mentioned three times. But, in these verses, God is seen as One who helps us increase our enjoyment and provide us with the wisdom and knowledge we need to get through this meaningless life with the least amount of anxiety. This is a popular way to look at religion. It is the way most people in the world view religion. It is the viewpoint where religion is used to help us get what we want in life. Basically, what Solomon is saying is this: “Use religion to help you find enjoyment and happiness. This will help you reduce the stress that you will experience in this meaningless life.” Religion as viewed under the sun is nothing more than a way of reducing stress. But this too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

I don’t know about you, but I can almost feel King Solomon’s despair as he looks back on all that he did and concludes that it was all a waste. Unfortunately, the king was unable to use his experiences to illustrate the other way of looking at life. But just because King Solomon failed to experience a meaningful life does not mean that it is impossible to experience a meaningful life. Solomon’s own father, King David, often sang about the wonderful works of God in his life. He seems to have had a personal relationship with God that brought meaning to his life. Somehow, King David was able to look beyond the sun.

A meaningful life is possible. In JOHN 10:10 Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Even though King Solomon seems to have failed in

experiencing a meaningful life, he seemed to know what had to be done to experience it. The final conclusion of all things is that we should “fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the duty of man.” King Solomon wrote these words in the very last chapter of ECCLESIASTES. He knew what had to be done to experience a meaningful life. We can only hope that his life did not end the same way that the life of Howard Hughes ended. We can only hope that, in the very last days of his life, he did begin to obey God with whatever strength he had left.

For all of us, there is still time. There is still time for us to work at making our lives more meaningful than what they presently are. I don’t believe that any one of us lives a life that is 100% meaningful. I think that all of us are engaged in at least some activities that are not meaningful. But there is still time for us to change. There is still time to increase the meaningful and decrease the meaningless activities in our lives. I would like to conclude this sermon by suggesting two practical ways to make our lives more meaningful.

The first bit of advice has to do with intention. Whatever we do, we should do it with the intention of producing results that last forever. Only things that last forever are meaningful. Jim Eliot was a missionary who was martyred while trying to reach a South American tribe with the gospel. Among other things, he is remembered for his famous quote, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” When we do things with the intention of helping others enter into a relationship with God, then what we are doing is meaningful because it will last forever. Wealth and health and education and even emotional happiness are all temporary things. We should not be afraid to use these things and even sacrifice these things to help others know God. How much of what we do at work or at school is done with the intention of helping people to know God? That which lasts forever is meaningful. Everything else is meaningless.

The second bit of advice has to do with method. When we work to help people know God, we must do so in a way that does not contradict the commands of God. Living a meaningful life means living a holy life. That which is not holy may last forever, but it is not meaningful. Hell is lasting, but it brings no meaning to life. The commands of God forbid us from engaging in sin. Even in the name of God, we can eat, drink, and be merry. But, if we violate the commands of God in what we are doing, then it is still meaningless.

A healthy fear of God will motivate us to do things with the intention of making what we do last forever. This, coupled with a desire to obey the commands of God, is what makes a meaningful life. The final conclusion of all things is that we should “fear God and keep His commandments,” because when we do these two things, life becomes meaningful.