

THE MEANING OF LIFE, Part 2

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-11

ECCLESIASTES 3-6

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Last week we began studying the book of ECCLESIASTES. In the first two chapters of this book, the Teacher, who we assume to be King Solomon, used his own personal experience to prove that life under the sun—that is life apart from God—is meaningless.

Of course, there are many people who would not agree with King Solomon. Some people do not believe that God even exists, but they still think that life has meaning. People who don't believe God exists call themselves atheists, and there are atheists who believe that life is meaningful. Atheists who believe life is meaningful must use things like health, wealth, long life, emotional happiness, education, or some other objective standard to measure the meaning of life.

But Solomon was not an atheist. The point of view that he takes in most of the book of ECCLESIASTES is the viewpoint of an agnostic. Agnostics believe in God, but they do not believe it is possible for people to have an intimate relationship with God. They believe people must live their lives apart from God. It is the "God is up there" and "I am down here" kind of mentality. Looking at life from the viewpoint of an agnostic, Solomon argues that life is meaningless. But there are agnostics living today who would disagree with Solomon. They would say that life is meaningful.

But to say there is meaning in life apart from an intimate relationship with God forces a person to use temporary standards to define what is meaningful. According to what the Bible says as a whole, the eternal part of us that God has placed in our hearts longs to have an intimate relationship with the eternal God. Our spirits long to connect to God's Spirit. Without that intimate relationship, there is no true satisfaction, and life remains meaningless. By denying the possibility of having an intimate relationship with the eternal, both the atheist and the agnostic are forced to look toward that which is temporary to find meaning in life.

When King Solomon looked toward the temporary to find meaning in life, he could not find it. I personally agree with his findings. I think that the atheists and agnostics who claim that life is meaningful are only fooling themselves. I believe that God allowed King Solomon to make a record of his experiences and

observations about life, so we can have a clear picture of how meaningless life is apart from an intimate relationship with the eternal.

Last week I suggested that we do two things to help make our lives more meaningful. First, I suggested that we strive to do things with the intention of making what we do last forever. Second, I suggested that we obey the commands of God in everything we do. By fearing God and obeying His commands in everything we do, we will live a meaningful life.

Now today I will give a different kind of advice that I hope will help us cope with a different kind of challenge we all face. The main challenge we face when we look at life from the perspective of personal experience is the challenge of making sure our intention is correct and our behavior is holy. When we begin to sense that what we are doing is not meaningful, then we need to examine our motives and our behavior. We need to be confident that what we are doing is being done for the glory of God.

But today we are going to move away from personal experience and look at the world around us. As we read the words of King Solomon and try to enter into his thoughts, we are going to be overwhelmed with the feeling that life in general has no meaning. Even when we do things with the intention making what we do last forever and even when we are obeying the commands of God, we can still be overwhelmed with the feeling that life in general is meaningless. It is a different kind of challenge we face when we turn our eyes away from ourselves and look at the world as a whole; therefore we need to use a different kind of strategy when we are confronting this problem.

But before I tell you what that strategy is, let's take a closer look at the problem. Our text today begins with a passage that was made famous by a popular song written in the 1960's. It is a continuation of the theme that was introduced in ECCLESIASTES 1:4-11. It is the theme of the material grind of the universe.

In ECCLESIASTES 3 we see that there is a pattern to this continuous grind where opposites repeat themselves over and over again—birth and death; planting and uprooting; killing and healing; tearing down and building up; weeping and laughing; mourning and dancing; love and hate; war and peace—just to mention a few.

Many people once thought that the first World War would be the war to end all wars, but it was not to be. Not until the end of the world will there be a break in this pattern of war and peace. Every period of peace will be followed by a period of war. And the same thing is true about the other things mentioned in this

chapter. The pattern swings back and forth from one opposite to another and it all seems so meaningless. ECCLESIASTES 3:15 says, "Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before."

I once read an article where the author said that Solomon didn't know what he was talking about when he wrote these words. He pointed out the fact that new things are constantly happening that have never occurred before in the past. For instance, last weekend we read in the news that the first cloning of a human being has taken place.

But Solomon was not trying to prove that new things never happen. He is trying to say that nothing new happens that can add meaning to life. Everything that happens is just part of the cycle of life that keeps repeating itself over and over again. There is a French proverb that says, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." That proverb expresses what King Solomon was trying to say. Everything that happens just adds to the proof that the cycle of life we see under the sun never changes.

So what should we do in light of this observation? From time to time I ask myself this question. I have been around churches long enough to notice that even churches go through cycles of spiritual revival followed by spiritual decline. Sometimes realizing this makes me feel like all the work I am doing is meaningless. What should I do when I am tempted to feel this way?

Before I tell you what I believe to be the best way to deal with this kind of temptation, let's look at the way an agnostic might handle this problem. Solomon was an agnostic. He believed in God. So, in light of the meaningless cycles that repeat themselves under the sun, Solomon gives the following advice.

First of all, in ECCLESIASTES 3:11, He acknowledges that God is in control of all things. He also states the fact that people were created with spirits. God has set eternity within the heart of every person, so people are morally accountable for all that they do.

But that is all the further an agnostic can go. For the agnostic, there is no concept of salvation where the separation between God and man can be eliminated and a person can have assurance that God will never leave him. Without the hope of salvation, there is really very little difference between people and the rest of the animal kingdom. They both have the same fate. The only thing that is certain is death. What happens after we die is not certain for anyone. And, as Solomon says in ECCLESIASTES 3:19, this is so meaningless.

Of course we know that this kind of thinking conflicts with the rest of the Bible. But if we view life from an agnostic point of view like Solomon did or from an atheistic point of view like many people today do, then I believe King Solomon is right. This swing from one opposite to another is all meaningless. There is no way we can stop it, so the best thing we can do is to learn how to adapt ourselves to it. This is the worldly advice that Solomon gives us in Ecclesiastes 3:22. He says, "So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot."

This is a pessimistic outlook on life, but it gives people who view themselves as living apart from God a way to muddle through life with the least amount of pain. It is good advice for people who are living under the sun; however, it does not make life more meaningful.

ECCLESIASTES 4 introduces us to another general observation which proves that life under the sun has no meaning. King Solomon took a look at the social condition of the world, and he concluded that the dead are better than the living. But better than both are those who were never born in the first place, because they were spared from ever seeing the social evil that is done under the sun.

Social evil or social injustice is a fact of every generation in every society throughout history. It is a fact that is brought to our attention every day in the newspapers, radio, and television. It is a fact that tempts all of us to feel depressed about life. Even if we acknowledge that there are some positive things happening in our society, all the evil that is happening has a way of canceling out the good things so that everything seems like a nightmare.

Then we turn to ECCLESIASTES 5 and, through the eyes of King Solomon, we look at religion and politics. And what do we see?

As far as religion is concerned, we see people being advised to do things out of fear. It is the kind of fear that exists between a slave and his master where the slave obeys the master because he knows that, if he doesn't obey, he will certainly be punished.

Look at the advice given in ECCLESIASTES 5:2. "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God." Why? "Because God is in heaven and you are on earth." This is religion that is lived apart from an intimate relationship with God. It is a religion without life and without meaning. But, unfortunately, the majority of people who consider themselves to be religious practice this kind of religion. Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and even many professing Christians practice this kind of religion.

And what about world politics? I have met people who feel that politics is the answer to the world's problems. But when we look at the political condition of the world, what do we see? ECCLESIASTES 5:8-9 says, "If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields." This seems to be an obvious reference to political power struggles resulting in the oppression of the poor.

Someone once asked John D. Rockefeller, the richest man of his time, how much money is enough. He replied with a perfect definition of greed. He said, "Just a little bit more." Enough is just a little bit more than what I already have. A real estate tycoon said something similar. He said, "I don't want all the land in the world, just whatever touches mine."

The last part of ECCLESIASTES 5 and all of ECCLESIASTES 6 describes the process of people struggling for power and wealth that gives rise to power. Some people come out on top and some people do not. And fate is seen as the main thing that determines whether we will end out on top or on the bottom. Look at the pessimistic words recorded in Ecclesiastes 6:10. "Whatever exists has already been named, and what a man is has been known; no man can contend with one who is stronger than he." It's as if King Solomon had said, "Life is like playing a game of cards. Whether we win or loose is mostly determined by the cards that have been dealt to us by God, and there is little we can do to change things."

Thus, through the words of ECCLESIASTES chapter 3 through chapter 6, we see King Solomon looking at the world around him and saying that it is all meaningless. The endless cycles that keep repeating themselves; the social evil that is present everywhere; the selfish religion based on an unhealthy fear of the unknown that is practiced by the majority of people; and the politics where the rich and powerful oppress the poor—all these things prove that there is no meaning in life. To find meaning in these things is like chasing after the wind. Meaning will never be found.

In all of these things that Solomon mentioned, there is one common theme. It is that man has no control over his circumstances. Man is seen as a creature of destiny from which he cannot escape. God is up there, and we are down here.

So based on this assumption, King Solomon gives us advise that will help us cope with this meaningless life. The main advice given in ECCLESIASTES 7 is to take it easy. Don't worry, take things as they come, and make the best of them. ECCLESIASTES 7:14 says, "When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad,

consider; God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future." In other words, good times and bad times come and go, and there is no way we can predict what will come next. Therefore, avoid extremes. Righteousness is good, but don't take it too far. A little bit of unrighteous behavior can add spice to life, but don't be excessively wicked. In other words, the best way to reduce stress is to find a good balance in life.

At this point we have to recognize that this kind of advice is not godly. It is worldly. But, for the man who fails to see beyond his own circumstances, it is reasonable advice. It is a rational way to live for a man who has no light to guide him other than the light he has within himself.

The advice given in ECCLESIASTES 8:15 is also based on what King Solomon has seen, while ignoring the things that are unseen. ECCLESIASTES 8:15 says, "So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad." And why does King Solomon recommend that we make being happy our goal in life? The reason is found in ECCLESIASTES 8:14. It is because he has observed a meaningless occurrence on the earth; namely, righteous men get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men get what the righteous deserve.

So King Solomon has interpreted life by things seen, which are temporal; and he has ignored things unseen, which are eternal. This was his main problem. And understanding his problem can help us work toward a solution. I believe God has allowed this book to be a part of the Bible so we can see clearly why life seems so meaningless for so many people. Through this book, we can even see why people who call themselves Christians feel that life is meaningless at times. The feeling comes when we use what we see to interpret the meaning of life. The solution comes when we are able to consider what is unseen. The solution begins when the unseen is revealed to our minds and we are able to talk with the One who is unseen. Life becomes meaningful whenever people are able to communicate with the unseen Creator of this universe.

The communication can begin with a simple question like, "Dear God, I do not understand all that I see happening around me. Could you please help me to understand?" Or it can begin with a simple request like, "God, if you really exist, please reveal yourself to me." When a person approaches the unseen God of the universe with this kind of attitude, things begin to happen to make life meaningful. God reveals truth to the mind, and things that did not make sense start making sense.

There is another book in the Bible that tells us about a man who observed righteous people getting what the wicked deserved and wicked people getting what

the righteous deserved. He saw the cycles of life that King Solomon referred to. He saw social injustice. He knew about the religious and political condition of the world. Just by looking at this man's circumstances alone, it would seem that he was randomly chosen to first experience good times and then to experience bad times. Like Solomon, this person was tempted to feel that life was meaningless. But, unlike Solomon, this man never stopped talking to God. His name was Job. He could not understand what was happening around him and to him, but he took his questions to God. By doing that, life never lost its meaning for Job.

The basic difference between Job and King Solomon was not in the questions they asked; rather, it was who they were asking. Job searched beyond the sun for the answers to life's mysteries. He talked to God. King Solomon refused to do this. He searched for the answers within himself, and he found no answers. Look at King Solomon's conclusion in ECCLESIASTES 8:17. In that verse, we read these words: "No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it." This is the conclusion of one who refused to talk to God.

In contrast, Job, who had directed his questions to God, said at the end of his ordeal, "My ears had heard of You, but now my eyes have seen You." Revelation came to Job. He did not figure out the answers to life's questions on his own. Rather, God spoke to him and gave him understanding.

In response to what we have learned from this sermon, I have only one appeal. I would like to appeal to all of us, young and old alike, to never stop talking to God. If you do not have a habit of talking to God, then start it right away. If you have talked to God in the past, but have been too busy to talk to God lately, then do whatever must be done to renew your communication with Him. Share with Him your feelings about life. Bring your questions to Him. Even if it takes the rest of your life to get an answer to some of your questions, never stop talking to God.

If we can do this, then God will talk back to us. We may never hear an audible voice, but He will reveal Himself to our minds. He will use the Bible to help us see the meaning of peace and war and the other cycles of life that we see. He will use the Bible to help us see the meaning of social injustice.

In the sixteenth chapter of Luke there is a story about a wicked man getting what the righteous deserve and a righteous man getting what the wicked deserve. The righteous man was named Lazarus. Lazarus had to beg for his food. The wicked man's name is not mentioned, but we know he had a huge amount of wealth. But the story goes beyond this life to the next where we learn that the final result

was entirely different from what we observe here on this earth, under the sun. When we talk to God, he will use these kinds of stories from the Bible to help us see that the final meaning of life is never found on this side of the grave.

In my last sermon, I appealed to us all to do things with an intention to produce results that would last for eternity and to obey the commands of God. Today I make another appeal. It is a request that we establish ongoing communication with God, and that we never break it. It is only through this kind of relationship with God that we will be able to find meaning in the things that we observe happening in our world.