

## THE MEANING OF LIFE, Part 3

ECCLESIASTES 11:1-12:14

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**E**ven though I have believed in God all of my life, something happened about thirty years ago that dramatically changed the way I approach God. For the first twenty years of my life I practiced a religion that taught me to fear punishment. I lived in fear of being punished by the God in whom I believed. But, thirty years ago I learned about the saving grace of God. I learned that God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to receive punishment for us so we could be free from the penalty of sin.

The change that happened thirty years ago was not a change of desire. Prior to the change I wanted to obey God. After the change I still desired to obey God. The change had to do with my motivation. Before, the main reason I wanted to obey God was because I feared being punished by Him if I did not obey. Now I want to obey Him, because I do not want to offend the One who loves me so much that He died for me.

I can say the same thing by using the word “fear” to describe my relationship with God. All my life I have feared God, but the fear I have now and the fear I had before are entirely different. In the past it was the fear of God punishing me for my sin. I did not want to suffer the punishment. Now it is the fear of God suffering. I do not want my sin to cause God to suffer.

In PROVERBS 9:10, we read that “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” This is very true. But, as I have just tried to illustrate with my own testimony, there are two ways of fearing God. There are two kinds of fear that we can experience. And each kind of fear produces a different kind of wisdom.

The fear of punishment produces a worldly wisdom. Its main goal is to avoid punishment. It teaches us how to be cunning so that we don’t get caught. But the fear of my sin causing God to suffer produces a wisdom that is from above. Its main goal is not to avoid punishment but to avoid sin itself. It teaches us how to obey so we don’t offend God. It is based on a relationship where we know that God loves us and we love Him, and we know that nothing can break that bond.

The first kind of wisdom, that is worldly wisdom, can help us to live a longer life. It can also help us to reduce stress in our lives, and it can even help us

to become prosperous.

The second kind of wisdom does not guarantee any of these things. But it can guarantee one thing. It can guarantee something the first kind of wisdom cannot. It can guarantee a meaningful life. A love relationship with God is the only thing that can make life meaningful.

When King Solomon had become an old man, he had grown in wisdom. But he admitted that his wisdom did not help to make life meaningful. Where did his wisdom come from? Let’s do a little review from the book of ECCLESIASTES so we can discover the source of King Solomon’s wisdom.

In the first two chapters of ECCLESIASTES, we discover that King Solomon gained wisdom from his personal experiences. As king, he could experience things to a degree that the average person could not experience. He had access to education, so he read many books. He had access to all kinds of pleasure, so he indulged himself to a degree that only a king could. Through his experiences he gained much knowledge.

And then, when we read chapters 3 through 8 of ECCLESIASTES, we discover another way that King Solomon grew in knowledge that later developed into wisdom. He did so by observing the experiences of other people. King Solomon was an excellent observer and a good listener. And, from his general observations of the world around him, he gained a wealth of knowledge.

But, knowledge does not become wisdom until a person begins to fear certain consequences. I can know that I will be burned if I place my hand in the flame of a fire. But this knowledge will not prevent me from putting my hand in the fire, unless I have a fear of being burned. The fear of something bad happening causes the knowledge I have to become wisdom.

Solomon’s knowledge became wisdom, because he feared the punishment that he would receive from God if he did something contrary to God’s commands. Therefore, he was able to apply the knowledge in such a way as to avoid punishment. He learned how to get through life with the least amount of suffering.

But, he made two mistakes. The first mistake was to view life only from this side of the grave. His writings seem to lack a perspective that comes from considering what happens after this life is over. Therefore, Solomon did not address the question of how to avoid eternal punishment. He was primarily concerned with how to avoid the suffering we experience on this side of the grave.

The second mistake Solomon made was his failure to think how his actions might hurt God. He only considered things under the sun. So when he was thinking about who might get hurt, it did not occur to him that his actions might hurt God.

But, putting these two mistakes to the side, there is a lot we can learn from the worldly wisdom of King Solomon. And for the person who does not believe in life after death and who does not believe in a God who can be offended by the actions of people, then this kind of wisdom is all that is left.

Let's take a look at some examples of King Solomon's worldly wisdom. We have already been introduced to it in our past two studies of the book of Ecclesiastes. Now, in the last four chapters of this book, there is a heavy concentration of worldly wisdom. I will now share three examples from the ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters of ECCLESIASTES.

ECCLESIASTES 9:1 begins with these words, "So I reflected on all this..." What was he reflecting on? In the first two chapters of ECCLESIASTES, King Solomon wrote mainly about his personal experiences. In chapters 3 through 8 he recorded his observations about life. Now he was reflecting on all of this. He discovered that certain types of behavior had bad consequences, and he believed that these bad consequences came from the hand of God. In ECCLESIASTES 8:17, he said, "I saw all that God has done." Basically, what Solomon is saying is that, after reflecting on everything, he made some discoveries. If you do certain things, God will cause bad things to happen. If you avoid doing certain things, God will leave you alone.

And so, in ECCLESIASTES 9:1 through 11:8, we find recording of things we should and shouldn't do. It is a record of King Solomon's worldly wisdom. They are conclusions based on reflections of everything he has experienced and observed under the sun. We will not have enough time to look at everything, so I will pick out one example from chapter nine and one example from chapter 10.

The first bit of worldly wisdom is summed up in ECCLESIASTES 9:10. That verse reads, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might..."

Now that sounds like real good advice. And, it is good advice. The thing that makes it worldly advice is not the advice itself; rather, it is the motivation behind the advice. The advice is good, but the motivation is bad. Look at ECCLESIASTES 9:10 again, and read the whole verse. "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom." In other words, beyond the grave there is nothing.

Of course it is good to work with all our might in whatever we do. But if we are doing it just to get the most out of life, because there is nothing beyond this life, then our efforts will become misdirected. Many people are driven to work hard. They even get depressed if they are idle, so they work with all their might. And, because they are working so hard and so long, they tend to neglect the needs of those around them, even their own family members. And family members need more than just money. They need attention that can only come when we slow down.

But, King Solomon's advice is not to slow down, because working hard helps us to forget about the troubles of the world and the meaninglessness of life. This is good advice for the person whose primary concern is to look after himself, to make himself "number one."

Now let's look at a second example taken from the tenth chapter. Notice ECCLESIASTES 10:20. In that verse we read, "Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say."

What is this advice saying? I think we can use one simple sentence to sum up what it is saying. Simply stated, it is telling us, "don't get caught." Again, the advice is good, but the reason behind the advice is bad. Here, King Solomon does not advise us to fear doing bad things; rather, he advises us to fear getting caught. He says, "don't do it, because you may get found out."

This is wisdom that is based on fear of punishment. People who live by this wisdom may look clean and white on the outside, but their hearts will remain black. People who live by this wisdom will never find true meaning in life. But most of the advice given in ECCLESIASTES 9:17 to ECCLESIASTES 10:20 is intended to help us know how we can avoid getting caught.

Now let's look at a last example from the eleventh chapter of ECCLESIASTES. Look at ECCLESIASTES 11:8. In that verse we read these words, "However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything is meaningless."

The advice is to enjoy life. And why? Because everything is meaningless. Life on this side of death is meaningless, but life on the other side of death is also darkness and meaningless. The only difference is that the days on the other side of death are more than on this side of death.

Basically, what Solomon is saying is, "Everything here is vanity, but everything beyond the grave is also vanity; therefore, take hold of and enjoy the

present vanity.” This is nothing more than worldly wisdom that helps numb the pain of living a life without meaning.

I don’t know about you, but these three examples of worldly wisdom leave me feeling sad. But I am not going to end this sermon on a sad note, because there is another way of looking at things. If we follow the advice King Solomon has given us for the reasons he has given, then life becomes depressing and without meaning. Now the thing I want you to notice is that we do not have to change the advice to add meaning to life. All we have to do is change our motivation.

At the very end of ECCLESIASTES, King Solomon came to this conclusion. He knew, at least in theory, that the key to a meaningful life is a different kind of motivation, a motivation based on a different kind of fear of God.

We first see it in ECCLESIASTES 11:9. There we read, “Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.”

Please notice that this is the same advice given in verse 8. It is advice to be happy. But look at the difference in motivation. Verse 8 tells us to be happy because everything in the future is dark and meaningless. Here we are to be happy because God is going to judge all of our behavior in the end. This is not saying, “Be happy, because you are going to hell in the end.” That’s not something to be happy about. Rather, Solomon is saying, “Be happy, and base your happiness on the fact that you are living in a way that is pleasing to God.”

The wisdom behind this kind of advice tells us that life is to be full of joy, and the way to find joy in life is to live life under the judgment or government of God. Wisdom that comes from above respects the rules that God has established to run the universe. It is concerned about obeying those rules, because it does not want to offend God. This kind of wisdom may not reduce pain and suffering, but it does help a person live a pure life, and that is very meaningful to the person who has a relationship with God.

Referring to this kind of wisdom, JAMES 3:17 says, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure...” It is pure, because it comes from a fear of offending God. It fears committing a sinful act. It does not fear punishment.

So what is the conclusion of the whole matter? ECCLESIASTES 12:13 tells us. There we read, “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter; Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”

Perhaps your Bible has little brackets around the word “duty”. Those brackets mean that the word “duty” does not appear in the original language. So the correct way of reading this verse is, “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man.”

This is a meaningful statement. The whole viewpoint of King Solomon until the very end of this book has not been the whole of man. Until this point, He only looked at man from under the sun. That is not the whole picture. Life that is lived apart from God is not a whole life.

Life in its wholeness takes in the things that are above the sun. It enters into a love relationship with God. And then it brings that relationship to bear upon everything that happens under the sun. It does this by keeping God’s commandments.

A person who lives life in its wholeness will never view life as meaningless. When we know that God loves us and that we love Him, then life becomes a song that is full of gladness and meaning.

At the end of ECCLESIASTES, King Solomon was able to write about the possibility of a meaningful life. It is hard for us to know if he really experienced life in its wholeness. We can only hope that he did. But, at least, he knew it in theory.

Through the blood of Jesus Christ, life in its wholeness can be more than just a theory to us. It is the blood of Christ that was sacrificed on the cross which makes it possible for us to enter into a relationship with God.

The thing that comes next on our schedule is Holy Communion. It is a time for those who have a relationship with God to meditate on this great salvation that has made it possible for us to know God in a personal way. If you already have a personal relationship with God, use this time to thank Him for the meaningful life that He has given you. If you have not yet experienced such a relationship and you feel that life without God has no meaning, then take this opportunity to pray. Ask God to save you from a meaningless life and begin a love relationship with you.

**Application:** What is the thing you desire the most? Do you desire to avoid punishment? Or, do you desire to please God in everything you do? In other words, how concerned are you about being holy, and why?