

Sermon title: The Meaningless Life (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11) Survey of Ecclesiastes

Introduction

What is the meaning of life? That is one of life's greatest questions out there. People travel all around the world and try many things in search for the answer. I read in an article this week from Psychology Today, and the author who is a psychologist and philosopher quoted Plato saying that man is "a being in search for meaning". He comes to the conclusion saying that "the meaning of life, of our life, is that which we choose to give it.". He echoes the conclusion that Richard Dawkins comes to. In his documentary series "Sex, Death, & the Meaning of Life", Dawkin's answers the question by saying that life has no meaning other than what you give it. It's entirely subjective. The interesting thing is, the message of Ecclesiastes would disagree with the article from Psychology Today and Richard Dawkins and many people all around the world who create their own meaning in life. Through observation and life experience the preacher, the son of David, King in Jerusalem, concludes that there is no meaning in life under the sun. If there is nothing above the sun, then all is vanity. As we come to look more deeply into the book of Ecclesiastes we need to be slow in jumping to a brighter conclusion and to think about what and why the preacher says what he says.

In the first 11 verses of chapter 1 we are given the prologue which consists of:

An **Introduction**: introduces the one who will be speaking in the majority of the letter. (v1)
We are also given the main theme and message or point which is "vanity". (v2) "All is vanity"

We are given **the key question of the book**. (v3) which is "What is the advantage of all things" or "what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun".

Then we are given **an introductory poem** which serves as an argument for his main message. Examples from the Natural World (v4-7) and Examples from human experience. (v8-11)

Context:

Our introduction in verse 1 says "The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem". We are introduced to a person who is identified as the Son of king David. We aren't given a name to who the words come from. The ESV translates his title as being "the preacher" or in the NIV the "Teacher". I think it is best to understand that this is a message from king Solomon. The reason why I say that is because of the characteristics of this "preacher".

He is 1. The son of David. Naturally as we read this we think of David's biological son Solomon.

2. He fits the description of being a king who has great wisdom which surpasses all who were over Jerusalem (1:16), he had an abundance of wealth, possessions and slaves (2:7-8), he had a hedonistic carnal lifestyle (2:3), and he had great structures built for him (2:4-6). In 2:9, the preacher explains him self as becoming "great and surpassing all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me".

1 Kings 4:29-31 writes this about King Solomon:

²⁹ And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, ³⁰ so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. ³¹ For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations.

When we think of a wise, knowledgeable and wealthy king, we think of King Solomon.

Nevertheless, whether or not he is the author/preacher, I think we are supposed to imply a "King Solomon" like figure.

The Message:

The message of King Solomon or the preacher is given in verse 2. ² "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

In the Hebrew the word that's translated as vanity in the ESV usually means breath. It has this idea of being temporary. What the preacher is saying is that everything is temporary. It does not last forever. It is meaningless and vain. It is about the absurdity and futility of life in a fallen world apart from God. And the words vanity is usually used together with being of 'no advantage' and 'nothing...gained' or 'striving after the wind', like in 1:14, "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.". This idea of 'striving after the wind' gives this idea of a person trying to catch the wind! Has anyone here tried to catch wind? Just imagine me running around with my hands trying to catch the wind! It would look so silly because the reality is, you can't catch the wind. It is impossible. It is pointless. It would be *meaningless* to catch the wind. It would be *vanity*. So, what the preacher is saying then in verse 2 is that everything that is done under the sun, which means the things of the earth or a life apart from God is vanity. Vanity of Vanities, all is vanity.

The Key Question:

The reason behind giving this message is because of the key question he is asking in verse 3.

³ "What does man gain by all the toil, at which he toils under the sun?". In other words "what is the advantage of all thing", "what can possibly be gained in this world", "What purpose is there in life?". And that is the question that everyone wants to ask. It is a rhetorical question because he has already given us the answer. There is nothing that is gained under the sun. There is nothing in this world which is "gain". The word gain is a commercial term which usually is used in the context of business. If you gain something it is a profit after all the expenses have been paid. The goal for anyone in business is to make profit. It is a return on hard work and investments. The opposite of gain would be loss. In essence, life lived under the sun will only bring loss. So, he paints a gloomy picture of the emptiness of this world. Throughout Ecclesiastes, the journey to find "gain" is very confronting and realistic. And we will look at some of it later.

But doesn't that shock you. There is not a single thing in our human existence, there is nothing in this world which is not futile. His claim is that everything under the sun is empty and pointless. And so, we need to pause here and ask the question. "Is there any gain under the sun"? The reality is many of us live life as if there is. Many of us find purpose and meaning in career, education, family,

travel, the pleasures of this world. And even though we may know Jesus, we spend so much time and money on things which will not last.

The prologue to the book of Ecclesiastes gives 2 main arguments for why he is giving this message. **Examples from the Natural World (v4-7) , Examples from human experience. (v8-11)**

Examples from the Natural World (v4-7)

⁴ A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.

When you think of a generation you think of children. We invest in children because they are the next generation. They are the ones who come up after us. The writer has a gloomy view on generations. Although one generation may rise and accomplish things, the reality is another generation dies. People die. And the once younger generation will one day become the older generation and they too will die. His point is although a new generation may give the impression that things are going to be better, death is a reality and the “earth remains forever”. Nothing really changes. The earth is still there.

He gives another example in verse 5,

⁵ The sun rises, and the sun goes down,
and hastens to the place where it rises.

Even the daily journey of the sun. how it rises, how it goes down is ultimately pointless. It is going around and around and around. And it never actually ends up going anywhere. It is an endless journey with no end. Its movement is repetitive and is not progressive just like life. It goes back to where it began, to the place where it rises. Although the sun seems to be constantly moving around the earth, the pattern is the same each and every day. And he sees the same thing when he looks at the wind and the sea.

⁶ The wind blows to the south
and goes around to the north;
around and around goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.

⁷ All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they flow again.

There seems to be nothing new. The wind gives the appearance of great change blowing from the south, to the north, going around and around but it is just going in circles. Nothing has changed. The sea, although continues to be filled with streams of water will never be full. Now we could go into the mechanics of how the sun, the wind and the seas work but it is poetic language. It is used

as a metaphor. The unfilled sea is a nice metaphor to anticipate the next few verses, which tells us that human experience will never be satisfied or full. The preacher looks at creation- the natural world and says that there seems to be an endless cycle, which goes round and round, and nothing really changes. The routine will always be the same. There is no gain.

Life is the same way in the sense that there are always more meals to eat and prepare, there are always more chores that needs to be done, there are always more things to do, yet at the end of the day, after all that has been said and done, we will die and there is no lasting purpose under the sun.

He summarises it by saying in the first half of verse 8, which is used as a transitional statement, "all things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it"

The preacher sees life and creation and says it really is very tiresome and weary. It seems so meaningless and futile. It's not just some things which are full of weariness. But it is "all things". He is summarising what he has said and is anticipating what is to be said in the next few verses. He is going to give...

Examples from human experience. (v8-11)

⁸ All things are full of weariness;
 a man cannot utter it;
 the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
 nor the ear filled with hearing.

If the sea is never full, then in the same way, speaking, seeing, and hearing are also activities which are endless. It might be interesting to note that in our examples from the natural world, only 1 negative was used, but in this one verse 3 negatives are used. The description of human experience is characterised as being very weary and unsatisfied. No one is able to express the true condition of the vanity and weariness of life through their speech. The reason why is because no one is able to speak meaningfully and fully about the world.

In Ecclesiastes 8:17 it says, "then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out."

The same idea is expressed about the eyes and ears. They are never satisfied. There seems to be a judgement on human life and their knowledge. It is very limited and will always fall short. There is a very negative tone about human life.

He moves on in verse 9-11 to see from history how that is the case.

⁹ What has been is what will be,
 and what has been done is what will be done,
 and there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there a thing of which it is said,
 “See, this is new”?

It has been already
 in the ages before us.

¹¹ There is no remembrance of former things,
 nor will there be any remembrance
 of later things yet to be
 among those who come after.

Now we might pause here and say that these verses don't make sense. 20 years ago iPhones and other smart phones never existed. We only had brick Nokia Phones. We now have electric cars and all sorts of modes of transport which never existed. But his point is not that we won't as a civilisation build “new” things. His point is as time moves on, history will be forgotten and the hard work of individuals don't actually produce anything. Man will always fail to produce anything which will give everlasting enduring satisfaction. Nations will rise and fall and human nature will still be the same. There will be times of peace and times of hardship. The cycle of temporary satisfaction and joy in “new gadgets” and “new ideas” and “new findings” quickly comes again. When I was in High School everyone had fancy Nokias. I always wanted Nokia. I had an LG phone, they weren't that good. When I eventually got my Nokia N97 mini, I thought I had joined the cool kids, I was so happy and satisfied with this fancy flip phone. But everyone by that time had the iPhone 4. No one cared about the joy and satisfaction in the Nokia phones. Everyone wanted the iPhone. Now, who cares about iPhones. There are so many options out there with Samsung and Chinese brands. They aren't producing anything new. They are producing the old same temporary sparks of joy and satisfaction which will quickly disappear. And no one will remember them just like my Nokia n97 mini.

From the preacher's perspective, the natural world and human experience shows how meaningless life is. It just goes round and round and people will die and there really is no eternal purpose found under the sun. It seems so tiresome and weary.

Thomas Schreiner, says “Ecclesiastes is realistic. It teaches us that life under the sun is often empty, futile, and absurd... teaches us that life on earth is full of suffering and tragedy.”.

At this point in time you might think surely there are some things which are not vanity. Well the preacher tries to find it.

Overview of some of the vanities:

Vanity in wisdom

In Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 it says that the first thing that the preacher sought to find meaning in life was in wisdom. In 1:16 it tells us that he even strives for wisdom and acquires “great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem” before him, yet he still comes to the conclusion that this

too is “vanity”. In 1:17 it says “And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.” Even finding meaning in wisdom is vanity. All the knowledge and wisdom of this world, he says is “but a striving after the wind”.

Vanity in Self-indulgence

In Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 the preacher tries to find meaning in self-indulgence. In 2:1 *“I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.”* What he is thinking is this, *“Maybe wisdom and knowledge can’t give purpose and joy in this world, but surely self-indulgence, the worldly things in life can give it...”*. Isn’t that what the world says. The world says that if you have lots of big houses, nice furniture, good food, good wine, fast cars, long holidays, big bank account, people serving you, being the best in the world, you will be happy and love life. but at the end of verse 1, the Preacher concludes *“But behold, this also was vanity.”* He goes on to describe how he indulges in life’s pleasures through all sorts of materialistic and worldly things. Verse 10 says *“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.”* Whatever his eyes and heart wanted, he got it. Just imagine, if you wanted anything in this world that money could buy, you could get it. Wouldn’t that make you happy? Wouldn’t that give you joy, meaning and purpose in life...?

But 2:11 says “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 wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.” The Preacher looks back at all this, all the things that he made, all that he had, all the times he tried to enjoy himself, yet he says it is all vanity. There was nothing to be gained under the sun. Nothing that could satisfy the heart

Vanity in living wisely

In 2:12-16 the preacher seeks to find meaning and purpose in living a life which is wise. And he tests the wise life and comes to the conclusion that there *“IS MORE GAIN in wisdom than folly”* since the wise is able to avoid obstacles in life but the fool will stumble over them. Wisdom has relative value but not absolute value as it does give some benefit in life. However, in 2:16 *“the wise dies just like the fool!”*. All of us will die will die one day, whether we are wise or a fool. And that is why it is vanity. Ecclesiastes 3:19 says *“For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity.”* For the preacher, the life of man is the same as the beasts of the world since they all die. The reason why he finds no purpose and meaning in even living wisely, is because it is not eternal. A rich life, a wise life, a foolish life, won’t last forever.

Vanity in Toil

I think one of the common things that people try to find meaning and purpose in is in work. Yet the preacher talks about the vanity in work. (2:17-26) The Preacher writes that his heart is full of despair in verse 20 because of all his labours under the sun. His biggest reason is that *“sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed*

by someone who did not toil for it.”(v20) You can not bring your possessions and hard work with you to your grave. Who knows if you heir will be a fool and ruin it all. And that is a common thing. Parents who work so hard to provide for their children and they just ruin it all. “Kingdoms take years to build, only seconds to be destroyed.”

Conclusion:

What is the meaning of life? That is one of life’s greatest questions out there. People travel all around the world and try many things in search for the answer. Ecclesiastes paints a dark picture of life. The preacher tells us that life under the sun is meaningless... All is vanity... The Preacher wants you to know that there is nothing in this world which can give you satisfaction and purpose which can last forever. He has tried everything to find purpose and meaning in life. We live in a world which tells us to eat, drink and be merry. It tells us to find joy in so many things under the sun... And the Preacher agrees with the world. Ecclesiastes 2:24, the Preacher says, *“there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.”* If this is all there is to life, then enjoy it whilst it lasts. If there is no God, then enjoy life to the fullest. The reality is nothing can fully satisfy you. None of these things can give you the meaning in life. Nothing in this world, nothing under the sun is meaningful...

I don’t think the book of Ecclesiastes gives us a clear solution. He hints the solution, and I think we are given an implied solution. The Preacher recognises There is a God. A living God who is the creator of the universe. There is eternity and all of us will one day need to stand before God’s judgement seat. He tells us in 2:24-25 that apart from God, no one can enjoy the pleasures of this world. He recognises that there is more to life than life under the sun. That’s why at the end of Ecclesiastes we are given 12:13-14, *“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”*

So, the answer to the book of Ecclesiastes is to stop looking under the sun. We need to look above the sun.

If you want to find meaning and purpose, then you need to look above the sun. You need to see and look at life with God.

Paul agrees with the writer of Ecclesiastes. In 1 Corinthians 15, he talks about life with Christ. And he argues that if Christ did not come to save sinners, if there was no such thing as eternity, “if the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”(1 Corinthians 15:32).

BUT, CHRIST DID COME. CHRIST DID RISE FROM THE DEAD. AND CHRIST BRINGS NEW LIFE TO THOSE WHO REPENT AND BELIEVE. There is eternity and we all will one day meet the holy and living God. His application is in *1 Corinthians 15:58—“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”*

He says, *“in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”* Things that are done under the sun is meaningless. It is in vain. But the things done for God, for the Lord is not in vain. What has meaning

and purpose is a life lived for Jesus. A healthy life, a healthy Christian, a healthy church, is a life lived for Jesus. And I want to encourage you all. Don't look under the sun for satisfaction, for joy, for meaning and purpose.

God has given you all a gift. The gift called life. Use your life for God's glory. Use your life to show that Christ is all that you need. Use your life for something that is above the sun. Only God can satisfy you. Only God can give you eternal joy. Only things done for God will last forever. If you don't want to waste your life, if you want to live a fulfilled and meaningful life. Live life for Jesus and do everything for him.

1 Corinthians 15:58—“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”