

Finding Life's Meaning

Devotional Reading: Luke 24:36-48.

Background Scripture: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; John 20:19-23.

Printed Text: Ecclesiastes 1:1-9; John 20:19-23.

Times: between 971 and 931 B.C.; A.D. 30 **Places:** Judah; Jerusalem

Ecclesiastes 1:1-9

¹The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: ²“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” ³What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? ⁴Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. ⁵The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. ⁶The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. ⁷All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. ⁸All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. ⁹What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

John 20:19-23

¹⁹On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²²And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Articulate the basic features and purpose of the book of Ecclesiastes.
2. Explain how Solomon's quest for meaning finds fulfillment in the resurrected Christ.
3. Write a vision statement for his or her life that is based in Jesus' concept of peace.

Introduction

Any Despair Out There? During the past week have you met someone who is in despair? Chances are you have. Such folks keep hospitals, police, bookstores, counselors, and churches very busy. Maybe you need look no further than your own home or heart to find someone in despair. Like Solomon of old, people look to relieve their despair in a variety of unproductive and even destructive ways. People try to make their lives more enjoyable by giving in to excesses in food, alcohol, sex, pursuit of fame, pursuit of wealth, etc.

Some finally sit down and, with the ultimate shrug of the shoulders, declare "There is no meaning." Are they right? The author of our first text today might well have felt at home with them. But at the end of his book, he judges that to fear God and keep His commandments form enough purpose for anyone. If we take Solomon's words out of context, we may feel better before we read his words than after!

As ancient as the book of Ecclesiastes is, it is in a sense contemporary. People are still trying to discover the meaning of life. They still experiment with power, possessions, and pleasure. And they still find such

things as fruitless as Solomon did. People today have an advantage here. Not only can we learn from Solomon's mistakes, we also have Jesus and the New Testament to give us redemptive insights.

Lesson Background

Few books of the Bible are as misunderstood as Ecclesiastes. This is a shame, for it is a divinely inspired meditation on the most profound of questions: What is the meaning of life?

One factor in the regrettable neglect of Ecclesiastes is the mistaken notion that the book is just a collection of uninspired musings (contemplations) about life from a writer who deliberately left God out of the equation. In this view, Ecclesiastes is in the Bible solely to show us how not to think.

At first glance there seem to be ideas in Ecclesiastes that are difficult to reconcile with Christian truth. But this just shows that we need more than a first glance when we study Scripture! When examined carefully, the book presents what amounts to a biblical philosophy of life. The well-known passage that closes the book (12:13-14) is not just an inspired exhortation tacked on to a book of worldly thoughts; it is a conclusion toward which the whole book points.

One of the lessons of Ecclesiastes is that life is meaningless apart from God. This week's passage from John complements this truth by showing that a life of purpose comes through the resurrection of Christ.

Today's passages will let Solomon pose some problems then let Jesus propose some solutions. Our teachers will be the wisest man on the face of the earth (1 Kings 4:29-34) and God's own Son, whose wisdom surpasses even that of Solomon (Luke 11:31).

Life Without God is Meaningless (Ecclesiastes 1:1-9)

Students debate the identity of the author of this book. But the opening words surely make Solomon the most obvious choice, even though he is not mentioned by name. In fact we would be hard pressed to make the words point to anyone other than Solomon. He is attributed also as the author, or primary author, of Proverbs and Song of Solomon (also called Song of Songs).

You will recall Solomon's role as the third king of Israel. He was a son of David and Bathsheba. Many students believe that the book of Ecclesiastes represents Solomon's musings in old age. These are the words of a man who has tried it all and is weary of his attempts to understand any meaning in life.

When Solomon is described as the Preacher, it is not exactly a preacher as we think of it today. The idea is more of "assemblyman" or "one who addresses an assembly." Teacher is also a good translation in this regard.

Solomon is one who had great opportunity to try all the various roads to happiness. He was known also as a man of great wisdom. We yet can learn much from both his successes and his failures.

1. Who is the presumed author of Ecclesiastes (Ecclesiastes 1:1)?

We are hit by the writer's dark mood right at the outset. His opening musings project a sense of hopelessness or at least resignation. By using the expression *utterly meaningless* or vanity of vanities, he underlines just how hopeless he thinks it all is. It is as if he has said "utter emptiness." He has tried everything. Instead of bringing happiness, his attempts have brought the opposite. Remember: the Preacher (Solomon) has had more money, lovers, wisdom, and fame than we can imagine (1 Kings 3:1-15; 4:20-34; 11:1-3, etc.). But he declares all is vanity.

2. What did the author mean when he used the term "utterly meaningless" (v. 2)?

Solomon now explained what he meant about the vanity of life by applying the truth to man's work. A person has to work hard all his life; but what, in earthly terms, does he really have to show for it at the end of the day? The phrase "*under the sun*" is used twenty-nine times in the book of Ecclesiastes. These words have an important defining purpose to Solomon. They describe the world taken by itself, without any other reality being considered. It is important to note, however, that Solomon himself was not writing from an under-the-sun perspective; rather, he was examining how we should live our lives, and this included an honest assessment of life's frustrations and lack of fulfillment apart from God.

The reason man's labors are empty apart from God is that everyone dies. Seen as a closed system, the world goes on endlessly in ever repeating cycles of futility. Because the bodies of believers are still unredeemed and because we still live in the world, Christians are still subject to the frustrations and seeming pointlessness of much that we have to do. Solomon would later urge people to give thanks for earthly blessings (cf. 5:18) because they are God's gifts and they point to Him, but the things of earth will never prove ultimately satisfying.

One generation dies, and then another comes along to take its place. But nothing really changes, even as our lives pass as "*a vapor*" (James. 4:14).

3. What did the author mean when he used the phrase "under the sun" (vs. 3,4)?

Ecclesiastes is a favorite book of many poets and philosophers. Accepting its unflinching analysis of how brief and fleeting life "under the sun" really is, many are determined not to put off important decisions about personal direction in life. An astute observer once noted that America, for its part, had changed from a death defying to a death denying culture. This means that many simply avoid thinking about the unpleasant issue of their own mortality. But it is our mortality that should give us a sense of urgency.

When we're in the midst of a stressful situation, the fact of our mortality can also help us ask "Years from now, how much of this will matter?" Perhaps this question can give you new perspective and urgency regarding your work in the kingdom of God.

4. How often do you think about your own mortality? Do you think about it too much or too little? What value is there in thinking about this subject?

Solomon proceeded to cite phenomena from nature that demonstrate the cyclical nature of life. These patterns of nature have influenced many of man's religions and philosophies. We hear many references to the "circle of life" and like phrases, with the suggestion that submitting to this-cycle is the sum total of existence. If we do not take God into account, there is much truth to this. Only God provides direction and purpose to history. Only He gives meaning.

The first natural phenomenon that Solomon referred to is the sun. The sun rises each morning and then sets in the evening. Of course, the light and warmth of the sun are a great blessing from God (cf. Gen. 1:14-19), and the regularity of its appearance lends order to our lives. But there is no denying the unchanging sameness of its activity.

Solomon emphasized this sameness by saying that the sun hurries to get back to where it rose from. In other words, he depicts a day as happening quickly. Think of how true that is!

Solomon next referred to the wind. The wind blows first in one direction and then in another. The "wind" may seem to be aimless, but it is not. The "wind goes" and "turns about" according to natural laws. It has its "circuits," and they seem to be repetitive.

5. What about the sun's behavior illustrates Solomon's point (vs. 5,6)?

For his final illustration from nature, Solomon turned to rivers. Rivers also picture constant activity without ever completing a purpose. They empty into the sea but never fill it up. Through evaporation and rainfall the water winds up where it started. While generations of people come and go, this process of nature continues on without interruption.

6. *How do rivers illustrate the vanity of life (v. 7)?*

Here Solomon considered the world of nature and concluded that "*all things are wearisome.*" The burdensomeness is so great that it exceeds anyone's capacity to express it. The world is awe-inspiring, but "take away its God, and creation no longer reflects his glory; it illustrates the weariness of mankind" (Eaton).

Adding to the weariness of life is the fact that we are never satisfied with what we have or experience. Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they rest in God (Confessions). Sin separated man from God, and even believers in Him struggle with their sinful flesh and the world's temptations.

The things of the world are God's gifts and can teach us about Him, but in and of themselves they fall short of giving us true happiness. Food and drink are necessary for survival, but satisfying these needs never ends and never meets our deeper spiritual hunger.

People are also always seeking some new experience, something that will give life meaning and purpose; but the sights and sounds and pleasures of the world are never enough. We finish one thing and soon are eagerly seeking some new sensation (cf. Acts 17:21). All the striving comes to nothing if God is left out.

7. *Why can this earth never fully satisfy man (v. 8)?*

One reason nothing in the world ultimately satisfies is that nothing really new ever takes place (Eccles. 1:9). Of course, man does invent new things and reaches noteworthy objectives, but the basic phenomena of nature and the basic emotions and motivations of man remain ever the same. His basic needs continue on, whatever new outward dress they are clothed in. In this sense there is indeed "no new thing under the sun."

The very language of verse 9 reinforces the idea of repetitive sameness in life. The same situations and actions that have existed before and exist now will continue on in the future.

As we move from the book of Ecclesiastes to the book of John, we will see God take action to reverse that problem. Jesus will give us something to live for.

Perhaps what Solomon is experiencing is the problem of sin that subjects creation "to vanity" and "the bondage of corruption" (Romans 8:20, 21). While nature has its cycles, it does not mean that they are meaningless cycles. History is going somewhere. History is moving toward a goal. Satan tried to derail that goal in the Garden of Eden. But Jesus is the one who corrected the problem, as we shall see.

8. *In what sense does nothing new ever take place (v. 9)?*

Christ Gives Life Purpose (John 20:19-23)

We now shift forward in time more than nine centuries. The incident at hand happens the same day as Jesus' resurrection, "being the first day of the week," which is Sunday."

The disciples are assembled" in secret because they are understandably afraid of the ruling authorities.

We may safely assume that these disciples are of the original 12 apostles. But only 10 are present since Judas is dead (Matthew 27:1-5) and Thomas is absent (John 20:24). Amazingly, moving past or through the doors, the resurrected Jesus appears to them.

By His resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ has changed the course of history and given His people a strong sense of purpose. What Solomon could only glimpse from a distance, we know to be a historical reality. Christ has broken through the repetitive cycles of history and is leading the way toward a future where the futility of life will be just a memory (cf. Rom. 8:18-20).

Jesus' resurrection body does not appear to have the same limitations as our normal human bodies. Jesus can appear without having to open the door. Remember that even before the resurrection, Jesus could defy the laws of nature. Walking on water is a good example of this (Matthew 14:25). Still, Jesus is no ghost or phantom. He can be touched and He can eat (Luke 24:36-43). As we will see in the next verse, there is a certain continuity between His pre-resurrection body and His post-resurrection body.

The first word Jesus utters is peace. That is what He offers a group of discouraged disciples not once but three times (here and vs. 21, 26). In some ways we may see this as a simple greeting. (Modern Jews still greet each other with the word shalom, the Hebrew word for peace.) Yet after the resurrection we surely can see this as stronger than a mere greeting! Before the crucifixion Jesus had promised to bestow peace (John 14:27; 16:33). Jesus' payment of sin's penalty on the cross has now brought true peace—it is a peace with God.

9. What event gives a sense of purpose to history (John 20:19)?

It is important to prove that the one who died on the cross is the same one who rose from the dead. That is why Jesus' resurrected body still bears the marks of the crucifixion. The scars prove He is the same person. Jesus has kept His promise to turn their grief into joy (John 16:20). He does this by showing "them his hands and his side." When they had seen this, the apostles began to overflow with joy. They then fully realized that Jesus had conquered death and was back with them.

10. How did Jesus show His followers that He had indeed risen from the grave (v. 20)?

Jesus repeated His message of peace. The world is restless, constantly in search of meaning and purpose (as Ecclesiastes makes clear). By contrast, secure in Christ's fellow-ship and with the promise of His empowerment, God's people can know a peace that "passeth all understanding" (Phil. 4:7; cf. Isa. 26:3).

Jesus had a special mission for His followers. This mission was as much a part of God's plan as Jesus' own life had been. The Father had sent the Son, and now the Son was sending His disciples out to pursue the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). Just as the Son and the Father were united, so the followers of Christ could minister in the world confident in the fact that they were united in Christ and would never be alone (Matt. 28:20).

Christ was not sending out the disciples in their own power. To demonstrate this, He "breathed on them" (John 20:22) and told them to receive the Holy Spirit. Some have asked why the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) was necessary and why its results were so momentous if in truth the Holy Spirit was bestowed here. But there are various aspects to the Holy Spirit's ministry. Perhaps here Christ was bestowing authority on the disciples to fulfill their apostolic mission (John 20:26; Matt. 16:18-19), New Testament Commentary, Baker).

Christ's act may also have been a foreshadowing of the outpouring to come. His "breathing on them recalls God's creative work in making Adam (Gen. 2:7). . . . This post-Resurrection 'breathing' was a new kind of creative work" (Walvoord and Zuck, eds., Bible Knowledge Commentary, Victor).

Verse 23 has troubled some people, but it need not be a problem. Jesus is speaking to His chosen apostles. They will become His personal representatives in this world. As Jesus came to deal with the problem of sin, the apostles will also continue this ministry of liberation.

As the apostles share the message of the gospel, they can, under Christ's authority, assure those who listen and accept the message that they are forgiven. The use of the passive voice they are remitted points to God as being the one who does the forgiving. It does not mean that if the apostles forgive someone, then God is obligated to forgive them. It means that the apostles are to announce the forgiveness that God already offers-that's the preaching of the gospel. When people hear the gospel, they either accept it or reject it. Accepting the gospel means forgiveness of sin. Rejecting the gospel means the opposite. This is God's plan.

We should not forget that the assurance that God forgives us is the greatest truth we shall ever know. There is freedom in the knowledge that God will not count our sins against us. He let Jesus take care of them on the cross. That is a message to embrace and to share.

11. What mission has Christ given to His followers (vs. 21-23)?

Conclusion

Empty Tomb, Meaningful World

We frequently speak of the empty tomb as being a sign of the resurrection of Jesus. That is true enough, but there is much more. Also highly significant are the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. The disciples had more than a month to interact with the risen Lord (Acts 1:3). It was His very presence that convinced them that the resurrection was real. If He had risen from the dead only to return to Heaven immediately and secretly, then they would always doubt. Jesus made post-resurrection appearances not only to convince the disciples that He was alive but also to give them their marching orders.

In the end we see quite a contrast between the lives of Solomon and Jesus. Jesus proclaimed of himself that one greater than Solomon had arrived (Luke 11:31). Jesus did not live the kind of royal lifestyle Solomon did. Jesus did not engage in all the experimentation. In his dark moments, Solomon wondered if life "under the sun" had any meaning. We may sympathize with Solomon as we echo Paul's words "what advantage is it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die" (1 Corinthians 15:32).

But Christ has indeed been raised! And it is "life under the Son" that gives "life under the sun" ultimate meaning. This is meaning that Solomon could only long for and catch a glimpse of (see Ecclesiastes 12:13).

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

History, in Jesus, is going somewhere.

PRAYER

Dear God, we are eternally grateful that You came into this world and brought us meaning. We sometimes fail to recognize it, but thanks to Jesus we always have meaning. We thank You for our mission and Your indwelling Spirit whom You gave us to complete it. It is in Jesus' name we pray, amen.