

CAN I FIND MEANING?

Ecclesiastes 1:1-4, 12-14; 2:1-3, 12-14, 24-26

All of us have seen the cartoons where one of the characters climbs up to the top of a mountain peak to ask some bearded elder “What is the meaning of life?” People have been trying to answer that question since there have been people. Philosophers have written volumes on the subject. Religions have grown out of such philosophies and yet most people do not know the meaning or purpose of life. Why do we get up every morning, why do we do what we do? One of the significant problems that people are finding in the philosophies being put forth by many in this time in which we live is that life has no purpose, therefore, suicide is the ultimate answer. There have been laws suit against rock groups because some teenagers committed suicide after having listened to a recording that had a subliminal message about suicide. Suicide is a leading cause of death in teenagers. They are at the age where they are asking questions about the purpose of life.

Some people (and this may be the majority) have concluded that the purpose of life is to stay alive from day to day. There are a lot of people that will tell you that they are just “take one day at a time.” This philosophy is usually stated after some tragedy has happened: a parent loses a child, a couple is divorced, a spouse dies and whatever purpose in life the person had before is now disrupted and the objective has become survival. That philosophy may be appropriate for the grief periods in a person's life until a better meaning can be found. Some people take the attitude that the purpose of life is pleasure. You grab all the gusto you can because you only go around once in life. Others search for meaning in life in their work, fraternal organization, social clubs, service organizations, and even in organized religion. These activities fail to ultimately satisfy because we humans are more than animals and have potential and purpose in becoming more than human. The true meaning of life really has cosmic significance and is related to our place in the Kingdom of God.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is about the meaning of life and the search for it. Most Biblical scholars believe that Solomon was the author and in this work he referred to himself as “the Preacher.” The Hebrew word for this is Koheleth which is the designation of an official speaker who calls an assembly. The English title for this book (Ecclesiastes) is derived from the Greek word for assembly (ekklesia) which is normally translated as “church” in the New Testament. In the Hebrew tradition, the Koheleth did more than present a speech, he carried on a debate with himself in which he presented ideas and then viewed each idea from various perspectives in order to fully understand the concept.

The book looks at the attempt to find life's purpose by a variety of means: work, wealth (materialism), wantonness (pleasure seeking), and acquiring wisdom (intellectual pursuits). This sounds very much like today. We have people today who are pursuing all these avenues trying to find meaning in life. Take education for example. We have convinced ourselves that the solution to all the societal problems is to just provide a good education for people. This approach has given us people who can better express their feeling of futility and frustrations. Education has not solved the question of the purpose of life. It has given us smarter crooks rather than making people better.

Life Can Seem Pointless - 1:1-4

¹The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ²“Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” ³What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun? ⁴A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever. Ecclesiastes 1:1-4 (NASB95)

Can you hear the frustration of the writer of Ecclesiastes? Many people attempt to find meaning in life through their career or job or their work. Think how many times you have described someone by their profession. “He’s a doctor. He’s a lawyer. He’s an actor. He’s a salesman.” It is as if we are saying that what a person does to earn a living gives meaning to his or her life. Solomon was saying that such an outlook or attitude is absolutely wrong! What you do for a living is not what gives your life meaning. Your profession, your career, your job is totally meaningless in defining what sort of person you are and your worth as a person. Vanity of vanities – that’s what it (all your labor) is worth. What you do for a living really does not make that much difference in determining who you are. I think that those who are retired can see this truth more clearly than those that are still involved in job and career. Things that matter must be related to a higher purpose than the physical world and making a living and just the day-in and day-out routine of life.

In verse four, Solomon identified one of the contributing factors to a sense of vanity and this is monotony of life. Things do “come and go” or tend to have a cyclical nature to them. Seasons come and go. Generations come and go. The sun comes and goes. Even the wind and water seem to cycle about which they indeed do. If this is all that we can see, then we can get the idea that life is not going anywhere except in circles. On the other hand, we have seen a lot of change in our life time; however, this has been an unusual time in the history of man. Most of man’s history has been so slow in developments that it would appear to a person that nothing changed in his lifetime but everything had a weary sameness. This is the attitude that can develop if we concentrate too much on the material things and not enough on the spiritual. A strictly secular society sans any sense of the spiritual cannot survive. The futility and frustration will drive people to apathy and the social structure to disintegration.

While much of life and nature have definite cyclical aspects, it is a mistake to think of these in terms of a circle that never changes. A better picture is that of a helix which, while going in circles, also progresses in a forward motion that is moving toward an endpoint or purpose.

Experience Seems to Affirm Futility – 1:12-14; 2:1-3

¹²I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. *It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.* ¹⁴I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. Ecclesiastes 1:12-14 (NASB95)

¹I said to myself, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.” And behold, it too was futility. ²I said of laughter, “It is madness,” and of pleasure, “What does it accomplish?” ³I explored with my mind *how* to stimulate my body with wine while my mind was guiding *me* wisely, and how to take hold of folly, until I could see what good there is for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives. Ecclesiastes 2:1-3 (NASB95)

So far this seeker of the purpose and meaning of life has concluded that it is not found in job or career and it is not found in nature. Perhaps one could devote his or her life to learning and understanding how things work. Solomon had studied the situation of “all things that are done under heaven.” Considering the limitation of scientific equipment of that day, we inwardly chuckle at the idea that he thought he had studied everything. He had studied enough to know that the world that God has created and put in our charge is overwhelmingly complex – “what a heavy burden God has laid on men.” We are to exercise dominion over the earth and to really do that we have to understand it. Solomon realized that it was a big job that a person could spend a lifetime and still not know the real depth of how complex it is. He saw futility in seeking wisdom or getting involved in intellectual pursuits. He realized that he could not learn enough to make a difference. I would imagine that many scientists today may have similar feelings. They

spend large portions of their life studying one small aspect of science and they may never see any fruit of their labor. They keep at it, however, because they see themselves as part of a bigger picture of overall discovery that will eventually bring benefit to mankind (life is not a circle, but a helix). There is an element of faith in what they do. This element of faith may be what was missing in Solomon's frustration. He did not have the big picture of what God is doing and that each of us has perhaps a small but significant part to play in His purpose. When we think that what we do is the center of things and that everything depends on us, then we can become very pessimistic in our outlook. Solomon thought that he was the smartest and best informed king there had ever been and since he realized that even he was very limited in what he could do, therefore, it must be that all of what other people could do is vanity. When we come to realize that God is at the center and that He is in control and that He is not limited, then we can rest in the knowledge of that truth and find meaning in being in His will.

If "wisdom" doesn't get the job done, then maybe the answer is in "wantonness" or pleasure seeking. Where do you think our nation is headed today? Are we on the path to greater wisdom or toward wantonness? Some media outlets will occasionally do a "person on the street" interview and we find it amazing how many people seem to be totally unaware of what is happening in the world around them. The only thing that has any interest for them is in finding the newest way to have a "good time."

Solomon was limited to wine, women and song. People, today, have become very inventive in finding new ways to stimulate their senses and attempts by society or government to control the excesses which can endanger the "seekers" as well as others have failed miserably. One of the differences in what Solomon did that is different from what is happening today is that Solomon was experimenting with various things (or we could say that he was testing life) to evaluate the results as opposed to just being addicted to the sensual responses produced by the stimulants. His conclusion was that pleasure seeking was nothing but foolishness or the opposite of intellectual pursuits and it was also futile.

Solomon also considered work (employment) and the resulting accumulation of wealth and materialism to be just as futile as wisdom and wantonness as we can see in verses four through eleven in this chapter. The conclusion to which he came is summed up in the idea expressed in verse eleven that all of what was done under the sun was vanity and amounted to something like trying to catch the wind. If you could catch the wind, all you would have would be a bag of air. It would no longer be wind but just air. Someone had said that vanity was all that is left when a bubble bursts.

Many people spend their lives learning, working, accumulating, and going for all the gusto they can only to have a serious sense of emptiness and futility as they consider what they have really accomplished in their life.

Trust in God's Blessings – 2:12-14, 24-26

¹² So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what *will* the man *do* who will come after the king *except* what has already been done? ¹³ And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. ¹⁴ The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. Ecclesiastes 2:12-14 (NASB95)

²⁴ There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. ²⁵ For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? ²⁶ For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind. Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 (NASB95)

After Solomon had concluded that everything that man does under the sun is vanity and

futility, he turned his attention to look at life from a slightly different perspective. Starting in verse twelve we see a comparison of wisdom and folly or madness. What can we learn by comparing the two that could be passed on to others who will be around after we are gone? The conclusion to which Solomon came was that wisdom is far superior to foolishness in spite of the fact that we have no assurance that what we pass on to others will be followed by our children or people who replace us in our job when we retire. That was certainly the case for Solomon. His son Rehoboam did not use the accumulated wisdom of Solomon when he came to the throne and began to rule Israel. Rehoboam followed the path of folly by ignoring what his father had learned. He would have demonstrated wisdom by building on what Solomon had learned and life would have been better for everyone. Instead of using his eyes to following what was in plain sight, Rehoboam wound up groping around in the darkness of his own ignorance and he, as well as the nation, suffered because of such foolishness. Rehoboam's approach that he had to relearn what Solomon had already documented was the result of following the "life is like a circle" philosophy.

Even if those who come after us choose the path of wisdom, the end result (while it is better than foolishness) was concluded by Solomon to be still futile since both the foolish and wise eventually die – or "one fate befalls them both." This certainty of death only added to the sense of vanity and Solomon concluded that he hated life. This was somewhat of a miserable state of thinking in that while he hated or was disgusted with life, he wanted to avoid death. This is where people can end up by only considering that which is under the sun. If our perspective is limited to this world and this life and we have no promise or hope of eternity and heaven, then we despair of living and dying.

Solomon went through the same analysis with regard to wealth and concluded that wealth is better than poverty; however, since we all die and leave the wealth to someone else, then this is also vanity and chasing after the wind. Again, the problem lies in the perspective of being limited to this world and this life and not realizing that we should be laying up for ourselves treasures in heaven.

As we examine Solomon's words starting in verse 24, we see the first of six conclusions to which he came in this debate with himself about the meaning and purpose of life. Each conclusion is that we need to accept life for what it is as a gift from God and to enjoy what we have in the will of God. Even though life is more than just eating, sleeping, and going to work, we can find pleasure in such activities if we approach them with a realization that they are not the ultimate goals in life. If life had no higher meaning or purpose, then all really would be vanity, emptiness, meaninglessness. God has given us a destination, a goal and a purpose that are tied to Himself and His purpose and in Jesus Christ we find life with a purpose.