

Ecc01 – Is There Meaning in Life? – Ecclesiastes 1:1-2

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We're starting a new series today in the Book of Ecclesiastes. I want to thank two primary writers who helped me get started in this series.

Derek Kidner, a British Old Testament Scholar
David Jeremiah, who is a master of application

Thanks to those two along with a number of other scholars.

In the classic 1997 film from the philosophical department of Nickelodeon came the one-of-a-kind movie Good Burger. And in it one of my many favorite quotes was when Ed, the main character, looks trustingly at his only friend Dexter and he asks, “*What’s it all mean, Dexter?*”

And right in the midst of some pretty funny comedy comes the question we all end up asking – “*What does it all mean?*”

Let’s pray. *Lord Jesus, we would as Christianized church attenders, we might say quickly – we know the answer. We know what to fill in the blank. Say, Jesus. It’s always the right answer. But Lord we pray for a deeper searching of our heart. We pray, Lord, for a revelation of what our actions reveal about our answer to the question “what’s it all mean?” “What is the deepest meaning and purpose in life, Lord?” And as we approach this book, so misunderstood and so avoided, may we learn that it is so critically important that we learn and understand that we grasp and that we apply the principles that you’ve laid down in this potentially life directing book. We pray our hearts would be open, our ears would hear, and that our eyes would see what you would have us to see. In your name we pray, Jesus, amen.*

Viktor Frankl the famous psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor in his book “Man’s Search for Meaning” referenced a study done in the early 1900’s. (100 years ago). This study that asked 8,000 college students what they considered “very important” in a life’s career, almost 80% of them said “finding meaning and purpose in life” was the most important in life.

Fast forward to 2001 and a study of over 10,000 recent college graduates regarding their career search and in that study the largest majority said they were seeking a career that would provide a “sense of accomplishment” and “adding something to people’s lives”. They wanted meaning and purpose in their lives.

And just recently, in 2012, a survey done by the authors of the book “Make Your Job Your Calling” found that almost 70% of college students considered a *spiritual calling* and a *sense of a higher purpose* critical to choosing a career. We want meaning and purpose *in our lives*.

For me, many of you know I’ve developed a deep sense of urgency for the “next generation”. More and more of my time and effort is being spent pouring my life into the *next generation* for this church specifically – but also in the broader ministry work that we do from here.

And my prayer for the next generation is that they would have a solid grasp on the true *meaning and purpose* of their lives.

Meaning and purpose... in the end these are the true “*desires of the heart*” that God has put in us. True meaning and purpose in life is what people are *looking for* and *hoping for* and sadly that is what we most often lose as we begin chasing what we think we’re supposed to be chasing. And most often, we end up feeling like we’ve been “*chasing the wind*” instead of building “*true meaning and purpose*” in our lives.

Rick Warren’s book The Purpose Driven Life has sold 60 million copies because we *want* our lives *driven by a higher purpose*. In the introduction of that book, yet another survey is addressed. This one focused on 250 philosophers, scientists and intellectuals. It was a one question survey... and here’s the question.

“What is the meaning of life?”

Some offered their best guesses.

Others admitted they just made up their response.

Some admitted they had no idea how to answer.

And some wrote back and asked if the professor who sent out the survey had discovered the purpose of life, himself.

Famous philosophers and intellectuals all wondering “*What is life’s true meaning and purpose?*”

All of the surveys are shocking to understand how crucial it is for people joining, like I said, what we call the “real world” coming out of college and entering this thing we call “the race” – but not the race like Paul called it in Philippians Chapter 3. This is more of the race of “chasing the wind” and building the earth’s dreams.

But none of the surveys is as sad as the suicide note David Jeremiah reprints in his book, “Searching For Heaven on Earth”.

To anyone in the world who cares:

Who am I? Why am I living? Life has become stupid and purposeless. Nothing makes sense anymore. The questions I had when I came to college are still unanswered and now I am convinced there are no answers. There can only be pain and guilt and despair here in this world. My fear of death and the unknown is far less terrifying than the prospect of the unbearable frustration, futility, and hopelessness of continued existence.

I have had the extremely devastating experience of having two people in my ministry career commit suicide in between counseling sessions with me. And that will change your life forever. Both of them and I would say everyone else who reaches this point asks these questions, “why am I alive today?” “Why am I living?” “What’s the purpose?”

Guys, when we or someone we know starts asking the deep questions about the meaning and purpose of life, we must know who to point them to. We must know *who* put those deep desires inside of us and we must know *why* they are there. And please hear me when I say *if we come to know WHO – then we will know the WHY.*

If we will come to know *who* put that desire for meaning and purpose inside us *then* we will know *why that desire is there.*

So many in our culture need that encouragement, need that information.

I’m going to give you the *WHO* answer right now. But the *WHY* answer – we’ll have to continue to learn as we go through Ecclesiastes.

As you begin to truly know God, it becomes pretty easy to see God put these deep desires for meaning and purpose into mankind – *at creation.* After all – *our creator* is the creator of life’s meaning and purpose and since he *IS* the creator of meaning and purpose *certainly* he would put that desire inside us.

It also becomes pretty easy to see since sin entered mankind at the fall of man that sin has distorted and confused *how we define* that desire for meaning and purpose that God put in us.

It’s the sin nature that’s caused us to be confused, to be distracted, to have our minds darkened. And when you take that sin nature and you fuel it with the influence of the world that is governed like a puppet by the little “g” god of the world, the prince of hell

itself, when you add that influence to the sin nature, it's no wonder we don't know what the true meaning of life is, what the true purpose of life is. Even those of us who are Christianized.

We used to live in a Christian culture and it Christianized us. But now we attend church and it Christianizes us, but really, honestly, don't Christians have the same question? Don't we still lie in bed and say "why am I alive?" "What am I doing here? What is my purpose?" And then we get up and go to church. Isn't there a disconnect there? There is, I promise you.

And with our fallen sin nature being fueled by a culture that is radically and violently determined to remove all trace of God, how simple it has become for us to distort and redefine life's true meaning and purpose.

Sin separates us from God and our sin nature has separated us from the true meaning and true purpose God created us for. And *that* is the subject matter of the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Guys, Ecclesiastes is not a *pessimistic or fatalist book*. It is not an "all is lost" – "give up on life" book. Instead, Ecclesiastes is a very direct challenge to each one of us to not get to the *end of our own life* and have the regrets and remorse that Solomon had at *the end of his life*.

That makes Ecclesiastes an optimistic book because it's a book designed to give us an opportunity to change our lives *while we still can!* And that is a great reason to study this book.

So, let's talk about King Solomon (author of Ecclesiastes). King Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived. His story is in the first eleven chapters of 1 Kings (a great read) and the part that leads to Ecclesiastes being written starts in 1 Kings Chapter 3. Because that is where the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream and said to him,

1 Kings 3:5 (NLT)

5 . . . "What do you want? Ask, and I will give it to you!"

After some exchange Solomon chose what he wanted from God.

1 Kings 3:9 (NLT)

9 Give me an understanding heart (or, wisdom) so that I can govern your people well and know the difference between right and wrong . . .

And in 1 Kings 3:10-14,

1 Kings 3:10–14 (NLT)

10 The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for wisdom.

11 So God replied, “Because you have asked for wisdom in governing my people . . .

12 I will give you what you asked for! I will give you a wise and understanding heart such as no one else has had or ever will have!

13 And I will also give you what you did not ask for—riches and fame! No other king in all the world will be compared to you for the rest of your life!

14 And if you follow me and obey my decrees and my commands as your father, David, did, I will give you a long life.”

In hindsight, God’s incredible blessing to Solomon became a double-edged sword. Because along with the greatest wisdom from God

Solomon also became

One of the **Wealthiest men** in the world

One of the **Most Powerful men** in the world

One of the **Most Influential men** in the world

And along with all of that came every possible human pleasure you could imagine, including (the famous) 700 wives and 300 concubines. With more of more – all of the more that you could ever ask for more of – and with even more than all of that at the end of his life Solomon writes what seems (at first glance) to be a rambling philosophical collection of regrets and remorse along with a string of very harsh observations about life.

But that’s not what Ecclesiastes is about.

King Solomon writes these last words of his life so direct and so real that you can’t help but feel that he is knocking you down with the hard facts so that you will listen to the hard truth about life.

And... isn’t that what we need? A strong dose of harsh reality so that we’ll listen to the life-changing truth from the wisest man who ever lived?

It’s said Solomon wrote Song of Solomon as a young king full of romance and unbridled passion for life and then Solomon wrote Proverbs at the peak of his life as the wisest man on earth with pithy sayings to try to impart the love of true wisdom to his readers. And then Solomon’s life crashed in every possible way. Everything unraveled at the end.

Solomon's wealth, his fame and his appetite for pleasure took him far, far away from God and Solomon was ultimately enslaved in emptiness, frustration and confusion.

You can read about it in 1 Kings 11, but let me just read a few verses here.

1 Kings 11:3–10 (NLT)

3 [Solomon] had 700 wives . . . and 300 concubines. And in fact, they did turn his heart away from the Lord.

4 In Solomon's old age, they turned his heart to worship other gods instead of being completely faithful to the Lord his God . . .

...

6 In this way, Solomon did what was evil in the Lord's sight; he refused to follow the Lord completely . . .

7 On the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, he even built a pagan shrine for Chemosh (a Baal god), the detestable god of Moab, and another for Molech, the detestable god of the Ammonites. (to Molech infants were sacrificed in his burning arms – Valley of Gihenna)

At the end of the City of David is the Valley of Gihenna from which we get "hell". And in this valley Solomon set up a statue to Molech, because this is the way you worship Molech and the shrines of Molech. It was a large bronze statue of Molech with his arms out. And they would light a massive fire around the bronze statue until the arms of Molech were brazen hot, blazing. And then they would lay an infant child in his arms and sacrifice babies to him in the Valley of Gihenna. Solomon set that up.

...

9 The Lord was very angry with Solomon, for his heart had turned away from the Lord

...

10 He had warned Solomon . . . but Solomon did not listen to the Lord's command.

And the most blessed life *ever* in the history of God's people came crashing down in a huge ball of fire.

And then, David Jeremiah says, ***Finally . . . in regretful retrospect, in the disillusioned autumn of his years, Solomon revisited the wreckage of a wasted life [and] he made one final stab at redemption: an attempt to block others from his own perilous downhill road to destruction.***

That's when Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes. He's saying "I've got one chance, I've got to tell them not to do what I've done."

Some of you know I am working hard with Grant and with a couple other people to raise them up in the ministry. So, we meet regularly and what I say more than anything else is “Don’t do what I did.’ Over and over, I say, “Look, I’m not sure what you should do in that situation, but I know what *not to do*. Don’t do what I did.” We look back and we say I may not have all the answers, but I know what didn’t work. And Ecclesiastes is Solomon saying, Look, don’t do what I did. Don’t go down this road.

More and more in my own life I’m realizing... “It’s what we learn *after* we think we know it all, that really matters.”

And Ecclesiastes is what the *wisest man in the world* learned *after* he thought he *knew it all*.

That is why Ecclesiastes *needs to be understood* and that is why (even more) Ecclesiastes needs to *be applied* to our own lives.

So, with that massive introduction let’s read the first verse of the book.

Ecclesiastes 1:1 (NLT)

1 These are the words of the Teacher, King David’s son, who ruled in Jerusalem.

Solomon never writes his name but instead the Hebrew word QO-HE-LET (Ko-Helet). This term refers to one who convenes an Assembly of Wisemen and then serves as its spokesman. So, the spokesman for the Assembly of Wisemen – QO-HELET – “The Teacher” he is King David’s son who ruled in Jerusalem.

And then the teacher begins his book with his conclusion.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NLT)

2 “Everything is meaningless,” says the Teacher, “completely meaningless!”

In the NET Bible (great translation with translation notes) this verse reads,

Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NET)

2 “Futile! Futile!” laments the Teacher, “Absolutely futile! Everything is futile!”

(When you see a word repeated numerous times, there’s a pretty good chance the focus is on that word).

You may be used to seeing the word “vanity” here. “*Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.*” But the word VANITY to us is often more connected with an *inflated self-ego*, or *self-love*.

A woman once told her pastor, “The sin I suffer from the most is *vanity*. Every morning I admire myself in the mirror for half an hour.”

To which the pastor gently replied, “My dear, you’re not suffering from *vanity*, you’re suffering from *imagination*.”

But that kind of vanity is *not* this word. The NET Bible uses the word “*futile*”. Other versions say “*pointless*” or “*useless*”. The AMP Bible says “*vapors of vapors*” and the NLT says “*meaningless*”.

“Everything is meaningless,” says the Teacher, “completely meaningless!”

This is a bitter and ominous word – *everything is meaningless*. And verse 2 doubles and then re-doubles the word for impact.

Tommy Nelson describes this first statement of Solomon like this: ***Materially speaking, life is short and then you die. You will lose everything you own . . . [others] will sell your house, purge your possessions, and spend your money. Ultimately, you will be a distant memory at a Thanksgiving meal***

That is what Solomon is going to try to get us to come to grips with and he uses the word “*meaningless*” thirty-four times in the book. So, we’ve got to begin to get a grasp on it.

Solomon is saying

ALL that we **WORK TO GET** in this life

ALL that we’re **CHASING** that we can’t take to heaven with us

ALL that we’re trying to **ACCOMPLISH** for our benefit in this life

It is **ALL ULTIMATELY FUTILE** because it is **ALL** going to **VAPORIZE** in an **instant!!**

Aren’t you glad we are studying Ecclesiastes?

This may be one of the most important books for Christians to study... those of us who have been Christianized but still *captured* by the world... still giving our lives to chase the wind, to build up kindling for the fire.

But remember, although Solomon *is* regretful and disillusioned, he is *trying* to get us to learn from his *colossal mistakes*. He had all the wisdom in the world and unfortunately, he had all the worldly pleasures as well. He ended up trading his wisdom for the worldly pleasures and in the end, he had nothing but *remorse and regret*. In Ecclesiastes he’s trying to do one last good thing with his life – he’s trying to warn us!!

But wait – is Solomon saying that even what we do for God is *futile*? Is even godliness *futile*? Is even passing along godliness *futile*? The teacher is in no hurry to answer that question.

First, he wants to *knock us down* so that while we're on the ground with the wind knocked out of our sails, with all our dreams of success knocked out of us, with our allusions and delusions all knocked out of us...finally, hopefully we'll be ready to listen to what the wisest man on earth learned *after he knew it all*.

In the end, Ecclesiastes *might be* one of the most important books in the Bible for a Christ-follower in our *material world culture* to study and apply. If we will join Solomon on his look back over his "I have a million time more of everything than I could ever want" life. If we will join him and feel his pain and suffer *through his regrets* with him we may come out with a whole new perspective on *own lives* and it may be a perspective that keeps us from having similar regrets – *as Solomon did*.

Please don't run from the hard stuff that Solomon is going to say about this life. Hang in there with him – I promise you the lessons in Ecclesiastes are good and they can be *life changing*.

Let's pray. *Lord Jesus, we need so badly to have your perspective on this life. Even Christianized as we are, we admit the world has influenced us, our deceitful heart has influenced us, our sin nature has influenced us. And so, Lord, we say today, together, I surrender. I surrender all of that to you, Lord. I give you my heart, I give you all of my plans and schemes and devices and purposes in life. I lay it all down for you, Lord. I may not know what the answer is but I know my way is not it. So, I surrender my way. I give you my dreams. I give you my rights. I give you the pride that drives my life. And I pray Lord that you would replace my dying life with your new life. I want to know you Lord. I want to know you. I want to follow your plan for my life at all costs. Please make that real in my life, Jesus. In your name, for your glory, amen.*