

Sermon: Is life Meaningless?

Trinity Virtual

22 August 2021

Sermon: Is life Meaningless?

Readings: [Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 and John 10:6-15](#)

Songs: [Judy Collins - Turn Turn Turn \(Live in 1966\) - YouTube](#) and [Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus by Alan Jackson - YouTube](#)

I looked this week at reports on some of the current natural disasters and upheavals.

Wild fires that are raging in Portugal, France, Israel, Greece, the US, Canada and other areas.¹ The devastating earthquake in Haiti which has left 2,000 dead and some 10,000 injured in a country still reeling from the assassination of its President.²

Refugees fleeing from political situations in Afghanistan, the Tigray region in Ethiopia, from Belarus into Latvia.³ More than 700 refugees searching for a new life saved as they desperately tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea, the youngest being 3 months old.⁴

A Pandemic that still surges like a wild fire.

The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report, released 10 days ago spells out that threatening climate change is widespread, rapid, and intensifying.⁵

The whole of creation groaning.⁶

I was not just doom scrolling, I was thinking "Where can we find meaning in this life?" Put the other way round: "Is life Meaningless?"

When I googled the question: "Is there meaning to life?" I got about 1.18 billion results (0,71 seconds). It is clearly a question that is on the minds of millions/billions of us. When you ponder this question it is time to turn to two books right in the middle of the bible between Proverbs and Isaiah that we often overlook.⁷ Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. Today I touch on Ecclesiastes. Next week we will look at the Song of Songs.

¹ See for examples: [Wildfires in 2021 - Wikipedia](#)

² See: [Haiti quake survivors cry for help as death toll nears 2,000 | Reuters](#)

³ See: [Latest issues - The Refugee Brief \(unhcr.org\)](#)

⁴ See: [More than 700 migrants saved from Mediterranean this weekend \(france24.com\)](#)

⁵ See: [Climate change widespread, rapid, and intensifying - IPCC — IPCC](#)

⁶ Some comments here: [What does it mean that all creation groans \(Romans 8:22\)? | GotQuestions.org](#)

⁷ An author, Stuart Olyott writes that these two books, although printed, were 'missing' from his bible but after studying them he was: "... no longer scared of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, and his Bible was complete!" Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.

Sermon: Is life Meaningless?

Trinity Virtual

22 August 2021

⁸Jesus said: "4 *It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, **but on every word** that comes from the mouth of God.'*"

It struck me that what was written so long ago, is absolutely relevant today.⁹

Some 38 times in Ecclesiastes the statement is made that all we pursue under the sun is "meaningless". Verse 1 Chapter 1:

" ² *"Meaningless! Meaningless!"*

says the Teacher.

"Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless."

³ *What do people gain from all their labors*

at which they toil under the sun?

⁴ *Generations come and generations go,*

but the earth remains forever. "

"The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem": this is Solomon, described as the wisest of all men,¹⁰ although the narrator may have been someone else.¹¹

Last week Lincon reminded us how Solomon, when told he could ask for whatever he wanted, asked for wisdom.¹²

"So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong"

⁸ In Matthew 4:4

⁹ Stuart Olyott: "Ecclesiastes, was written for us, and we cannot ignore it without impoverishing ourselves. Its style is not quite what we are used to, but its message is plain. It tells us what kind of living is worthwhile. This it does by a process of reasonings, reflections, observations and conclusions, all encapsuled in pithy and brief lines of poetry. There is a wonderful freshness about it all. What it says is so startlingly relevant that we find it hard to believe that it was not written today."

¹⁰ [1 Kings 4:30 NIV - Solomon's wisdom was greater than the - Bible Gateway](#)

¹¹ The wisdom of Ecclesiastes comes from someone who is identified as "Qoheleth." It's not certain whether this is a personal name, some sort of pseudonym, or the title of an office. Judging from the meaning of the related verb, it would seem that the word means "convener" or "assembler"—thus the common English translations "Teacher" (NIV) or "Preacher." Traditionally Qoheleth has been identified as Solomon because of the information given in the first two verses of the book. It is argued that no one else was "son of David, king in Jerusalem." From: [Who Wrote Ecclesiastes and What Does It Mean? | Zondervan Academic](#)

¹² See: [2 Chronicles 1 NIV - Solomon Asks for Wisdom - Solomon son - Bible Gateway](#) and [1 Kings 3:1-15 NIV - Solomon Asks for Wisdom - Solomon made - Bible Gateway](#)

Sermon: Is life Meaningless?

Trinity Virtual

22 August 2021

God gave Solomon a wise and discerning heart but also, "*both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings.*"

Solomon became a King like no other, having immense wisdom, power, wealth, and prestige. We can only dream of what we would do with unlimited wealth. Solomon had no such limitation.¹³

In Ecclesiastes Solomon looks at life from two viewpoints: firstly, through the eyes of the unconverted men and women; and secondly through the eyes of men and women to whom God has revealed himself. He does this alternately in what can be described as four sermons.¹⁴

An author, Stuart Olyott, gives a practical tip. Underline the words '*meaningless*' (in some translations 'vanity' or 'futility') in black and '*God*' in red.¹⁵

The words underlined in black guide you to Solomon occupied with the first point of view. The clusters of the word '*God*' underlined in red identify those sections where Solomon brings God into the picture.

When I read Ecclesiastes without understanding this, it seemed a harsh and dark book. Chapter after chapter describing that all we undertake is meaningless.

We look for excitement and shop the world for pleasure. We try this and that. Money, sex, power, adventure, and knowledge. All so promising at first! But nothing amounts to anything or lasts. The harder we try the less we get out of it.¹⁶

Were Simon and Garfunkel right when they sang in Patterns?

Like a rat in a maze
The path before me lies
And the pattern never alters
Until the rat dies¹⁷

¹³ Olyott writes this: "So very many who walk the path of self-indulgence can only dream of what they would like to have. Solomon suffered from no such limitation. His greatness permitted him to have his every whim, and to possess everything he had ever set his eyes on."

¹⁴ First sermon: 1:12-3:15; second sermon: 3:16-5:20; third sermon: 6:1- 8:13; fourth sermon 8:14-12:7 and conclusion or epilogue 12:8-14.

¹⁵ If you don't want to write in your bible copy the book from a site such as Biblegateway (www.biblegateway.com) and do the underlining on your computer.

¹⁶ Eugene Peterson in his Introduction to Ecclesiastes in The Message.

¹⁷ From: [lyrics patterns simon garfunkel - Google Search](https://www.google.com/search?q=lyrics+patterns+simon+garfunkel)

I understand that the Hebrew word for 'meaningless' ('futility' or 'vanity') is "Hébel" which means 'breath' or 'vapour'. In 5 of the verses a parallel meaning is given to "meaningless" being a "*chasing after the wind*".¹⁸

Perhaps a better description: not a final conclusion, but as we can't catch the wind the meaning of life seems elusive.¹⁹

So hold in your mind:

Firstly: man striving solely in his own strength, and man to whom God has been revealed; and

Secondly: finding meaning in life is elusive.

Time permits us to look only briefly at the first of the four sermons where Solomon looks at four pursuits:²⁰ These are:

- ✚ intellectual pursuit;
- ✚ the pursuit of pleasure;
- ✚ success as the King – pre-eminence; and
- ✚ hard work.

The word "God" appears only once from 1:12 to 2:23.

Solomon starts:²¹

*"**13** I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind! **14** I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind."*

Solomon considers whether "wisdom" and "knowledge" are the meaning of life.²²

¹⁸ [Ecclesiastes 1:14, 17; 2: 11, 17, 20.](#)

¹⁹ "This indicates that "meaningless" is not a final conclusion but an utterance of despair; just as one cannot catch the wind, so the meaning of life seems utterly elusive to the Teacher". Footnote on page 1264 of NIV Zondervan Study Bible – DA Carson (General Editor).

²⁰ Ecclesiastes 1:12 - 2:23.

²¹ Ecclesiastes 1:13-14.

²² Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

Although Solomon had "*increased in wisdom more than anyone who had ruled over Jerusalem before him*" his conclusion is that the world remained full of problems that men and women could not solve.

"Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is chasing after the wind."²³

Solomon says that with much wisdom comes much sorrow, and the more knowledge, the more grief.

Then Solomon turns to consider whether pleasure is not the key to life.²⁴ Could utter and absolute self-indulgence be the source of complete satisfaction and be the meaning of life?

He tried cheering himself up with wine, women and song as he tried to decide what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

What did he undertake?²⁵

He constructed buildings, harbours and cities. He planted forests and waterways to irrigate them. He bought slaves, herds and flocks. Accumulated mountains of gold and silver. He had musicians to entertain him and maidens for his bed.

He had 700 wives and 300 concubines.²⁶ In our fellowship group Louise told us that perhaps Solomon was as wise as he was because he had so many wives to tell him what to do!

Solomon concludes that his strivings after pleasure were a waste of time without any lasting gain. He says that his heart took delight in enjoying the pleasures and possessions, but when he really considered this "*... Everything was meaningless, chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.*"

²³ Ecclesiastes 1:17

²⁴ He looks at this in Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

²⁵ Eugene Peterson paraphrases 2:4-9 in *The Message*: "I Never Said No to Myself. 4-8 Oh, I did great things: built houses, planted vineyards, designed gardens and parks and planted a variety of fruit trees in them, made pools of water to irrigate the groves of trees. I bought slaves, male and female, who had children, giving me even more slaves; then I acquired large herds and flocks, larger than any before me in Jerusalem. I piled up silver and gold, loot from kings and kingdoms. I gathered a chorus of singers to entertain me with song, and—most exquisite of all pleasures — voluptuous maidens for my bed."

²⁶ 1 Kings 11:3

Then Solomon considered whether pre-eminence, reputation, standing was not the key to life. Given who he was, and the positions that he held, he exceeded the standing of other men in virtually every area of life: power, possessions, knowledge, reputation and wealth.

He says that there may be a successor equal to him, but there would be no one who would surpass him.

He saw in the world wisdom, as well as madness and folly. He saw that wisdom was better than madness and folly. A wise man could see what was ahead and could choose his way.²⁷ But both wise and foolish soon die and are quickly forgotten.

What then about hard work, toil?²⁸ Solomon not only spent his time pursuing wisdom, pleasures and pre-eminence. He kept on undertaking new projects, working at them, building, investing and producing. But he did not find meaning in doing this. He despairs at who would take over.

"Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil, into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless."

Olyott writes this before looking at the next passage:

"Is there such a thing as life with point, with purpose? The answer now comes to us in the second half of this first sermon. God in the picture."

Turn to 2:24 until 3:15 and you will see a cluster of nine references to God. Here looking at life as viewed by the person with God in the picture, Solomon reaches three conclusions:

- ✚ There is no satisfaction without God;
- ✚ Everything is part of a plan; and
- ✚ Everything is for a purpose.

There is no satisfaction without God. In these verses Solomon is focusing on having God at the centre of one's life.

²⁷ Ecclesiastes 2:15-16

²⁸ Ecclesiastes 2:18-23. You will see that "labour" appears eight times in this section.

True meaning can be found, but we do not have the power to achieve this on our own. This is something given by God; a gift from God. We are, through the gift of God, to "*eat and drink and find satisfaction in our own toil.*" In all we do.

Bear with me a little further as you hold this thought - this will become clearer.

Everything is part of a plan.

Chapter 3:1-8, the verses I read as a call to worship, contain probably the best-known verses in Ecclesiastes. Many are unaware that these verses come from the Bible.

Pairs of contrasting events, each pair introduced by words "a time to ...". The first events are "*a time to be born, and a time to die.*" All the others take place between these two.

You may ask why this is included at this point. From an earthbound perspective everything "under the sun" is without significance but:

"Everything in this universe is part of a grand scheme (verse one-There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens). There is a season, an appointed period, for every event. All that takes place occurs at its appropriate time. It has been predetermined. Every detail of life serves an overall purpose, and plays its part in bringing that purpose to pass. Seemingly chance events are all tied into an eternal plan."²⁹

Solomon sees that while we can't, through our own mental powers, understand everything under the sun, there are different seasons for every activity under the heavens - all part of God's plan.

Everything is for a purpose.

The conclusion here is that in its right time, place, and as part of the overall plan everything in life is of significance. Accordingly, it is beautiful.

You are a spiritual creature, and because of this you seek meaning in life and in the things around you. God has set eternity in your heart.

In the Amplified Bible we read:

²⁹ Stuart Olyott.

"11 He has made everything beautiful and appropriate in its time. He has also planted eternity [a sense of divine purpose] in the human heart [a mysterious longing which nothing under the sun can satisfy, except God]³⁰—yet man and woman cannot find out (comprehend, grasp) what God has done (His overall plan) from the beginning to the end."

Ponder on this thought that God has placed eternity in your heart!

Solomon continues to say that everything that God does will endure for ever and that nothing can be added to it, or taken away from it. God does this, so that men and women will fear and worship Him [with awe-filled reverence, knowing that He is God]³¹.

So, when Solomon says that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while living, eating, drinking and finding satisfaction in all their hard work they are to know that this is a gift of God and that God is to be at the centre of all they do.

So is life meaningless? A bleak message if you don't reach chapter 12 and follow the signpost.

"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 and woman. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."

"Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man and woman." This the conclusion from the person who has experienced everything offered by life "under the sun". He is not to be misunderstood in this regard. He is not saying that searching for wisdom, working well, living well or undertaking great projects is a bad thing. He is saying that living without God at the centre of your life leaves little meaning to the time that you spend "under the sun".

³⁰ Augustine: "My heart is restless until it finds its rest in you".

³¹ From the Amplified Bible

Eugene Peterson describes Ecclesiastes as "a John-the-Baptist kind of book. It functions not as a meal but as a bath. It is not nourishment; it is cleansing. It is repentance. It is purging."

Solomon concludes that there is a life worth living. It is a life spent living with God at the centre of all you and I undertake. Accepting that:

- ✚ There is no satisfaction without God;
- ✚ Everything is part of a plan; and
- ✚ Everything is for a purpose.

It is when we remove God from centre stage and try to do everything solely in our own strength alone that our existence "under the sun" becomes meaningless. When God is present in everything we undertake life is different. It doesn't mean that life will be easy or that there won't be events that are unexpected, appalling or difficult to understand.

I like the way Eugene Peterson puts it. Ecclesiastes is not a meal it is a bath. It cleans us from the misconceptions that we have, and that are directed unceasingly at us. It points to the need to learn about God, and the need to place God at the very centre of all you and I do.

Solomon doesn't tell us how we are to find God or how we are to live our lives. He leaves this to the other 65 books in the Bible. But he is adamant: don't think you will find real meaning in life 'under the sun' without finding God. We need the good shepherd to guide us, to call us to follow, so that we may have more and better life than we ever imagined.³²

The book that follows Ecclesiastes is the Song of Songs, written by Solomon in which love at its purest is described. Love that would culminate in God sending Jesus to live with us 'under the sun' and to die for us.

"¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."³³

³² [John 10: 1-10](#)

³³ [John 3:16](#)

Sermon: Is life Meaningless?

Trinity Virtual

22 August 2021

*"I came so that you (they) can have real and eternal life, more and better life than you (they) ever dreamed of."*³⁴

More and eternal means quantity, better and real means quality.

Jesus warned us that in this life we will have troubles.³⁵

"I've told you all this so that trusting me, you will be unshakable and assured, deeply at peace. In this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I've conquered the world."

More and eternal means that whatever life throws at you on this earth is not all that there is.

More and eternal means that our separation from God was forever broken on the Cross.

Better and real means living without the sense that *"all is meaningless"* because our sure and assured hope is in Jesus.³⁶

There is a life worth living and there is a Lord worth loving.

1. O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There's light for a look at the Savior,
And life more abundant and free!

Refrain:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

Gordon Hay

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Lynnwood Pretoria www.trinity.org.za

22nd August 2021

³⁴ John 10:10 (*The Message*)

³⁵ [John 16:33 MSG - Jesus answered them, "Do you finally - Bible Gateway](#)

³⁶ Five verses that demonstrate the hope we can find in Jesus Christ. [1 John 5:13-14](#); [1 Peter 1:3-6](#); [Ephesians 2:8-10](#); [2 Corinthians 4:16-18](#); [John 4:13-14](#).