

Solomon Reflects on the Meaning of Life

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Because God exists, life has meaning and purpose.

Ecclesiastes. Of all the books in the Bible, this one is perhaps the most unique, but why is it so important? Because it poses the questions that the rest of the Bible answers. It confronts us with questions we may never have thought to ask, but should:

- Does life have any meaning?
- Why are we here?
- Does what we do really matter?
- Is history going anywhere?
- Is there any justice in the world?
- Is there anything beyond the grave?
- Why do things seem random and purposeless at times?
- Will anything satisfy the ache and longing at the deepest level of our hearts?

? Take a moment to discuss the words of Tom Brady (see “Voices from the Culture”). How would you respond to a friend or neighbor who expressed a similar sentiment?

Voices from the Culture

“Why do I have three Super Bowl rings, and still think there’s something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, ‘Hey man, this is what is.’ I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think...it’s gotta be more than this. I mean this can’t be what it’s all cracked up to be. I mean I’ve done it. I’m 27. And what else is there for me?”¹

—Tom Brady, New England Patriots quarterback

Date of My Bible Study: _____

In this session, we are going to align ourselves with Solomon and ask some of the same questions he asked. As we pose these questions together, we should look for their resolution in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Knowing that God exists, we can experience a life of meaning, justice, and purpose, and we call others to seek answers to their questions by looking to Christ.

1. Does life have meaning? (Eccl. 1:1-11)

¹ *The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*

² *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

³ *What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?*

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

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

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.*

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.*

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.*

Talk about an introduction! If Solomon planned to get our attention, he's done it. What are we to do with these words? We could immediately write them off as some pessimistic, glass-half-empty view of the world. But the Holy Spirit inspired these words to be in the Bible. We don't have the option of writing them off. So let's look at the world the way Solomon did for a few moments and find out what he meant here. When he looked out at the world, he saw three main things that led him to the conclusion that life is futile.

There appears to be no permanence (vv. 3-4).

First, Solomon saw no permanence in the world. Life is like an endless treadmill that one generation runs on for a while before getting replaced by another. Ideas and innovations come and go, but nothing appears to last. Achievements and advancements happen, but is the world really any better? Solomon's answer was a resounding no!



What are some examples of the fleeting and temporary nature of this life?

There appears to be no productivity (vv. 5-7).

The next thing Solomon mentioned was the sun, the wind, and the streams and how they seem to produce no results. Solomon later applied this to our daily lives. Think about your day. We sleep in our bed, then make it up, and repeat the process. Our hair grows, we cut it, and it grows back. Our clothes get dirty, and we wash them—only to get them dirty again!

Monotony is everywhere. There are so many areas of life that achieve no real results and produce virtually nothing of any importance. Is there any end result to all of this? Again, Solomon's answer was no.



When have you felt like you were involved in work that was continual but unproductive? What were the circumstances?

There appears to be no progress (vv. 8-11).

Nothing is new under the sun. The eyes and ears never seem to be satisfied. Every new invention or gadget that comes down the pike never really satisfies us. Sure, they may entertain us for a little while, but they do not change the monotony and the impermanence of the things previously mentioned. Generations still come and go. The sun continues to rise and set. The latest product that people stand in line for will do nothing to alter the world as it is. Therefore, it is all futile, according to Solomon.

The picture Solomon painted here is reality—if we push God out of our lives. But when God is at the center of our lives as our King and treasure, all of life is filled with meaning and purpose. All that we do matters. If Jesus is who He said He was and if He truly is raised from the dead and reigning over all things, then everything we do matters. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote, “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” (1 Cor. 15:58). Without Him, everything we do is in vain. With Him, everything we do has meaning and value and purpose.

 **Voices from the Church**

“What is true of the universe and of the human race is also true of us as individuals... If God does not exist, then you are just a miscarriage of nature, thrust into a purposeless universe to live a purposeless life.”²

—William Lane Craig



What are some signs that we have succumbed to a pessimistic view of life?



How does faith in Christ help us through these trying moments?

2. Is there justice and goodness in this world? (Eccl. 3:16–4:3)

¹⁶ Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. ¹⁷ I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. ¹⁸ I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. ²¹ Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? ²² So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

^{4:1} Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. ² And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. ³ But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

All of us long for things to be set right in this world, for things to be put back in their proper place. We lament, with Solomon, that when we search for righteousness, we often find wickedness in its place. We long for peace, for restoration, and our only hope is that God will bring everything into judgment (v. 17).

Solomon seemed to find some comfort with this idea of God as judge. But we can find even more comfort because we know what Solomon did not know. We know that because God raised Jesus from the dead, He will raise us. And not only us, but the whole of creation will be renewed and redeemed. He will wipe away every tear. He will set all things right. He will make all things new. He will make a new heaven and a new earth. He will put an end to sin, Satan, and death.



What kinds of injustice or suffering in the world are most likely to get your attention?



What kinds of injustice or suffering are you most likely to ignore?

Our God will act on our behalf. He will bring about the glory of His righteousness and justice. In the meantime, we are to hold to the words of Peter: “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet. 5:10-11). All dominion and power ultimately belong to God, and in His time He will bring about the perfection and peace for which we all long. Let us wait with patience and endurance for our God to act.



Voices from the Church

“What creation needs is neither abandonment nor evolution but rather redemption and renewal; and this is both promised and guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is what the whole world’s waiting for.”³

—N. T. Wright



How does faith in Christ’s promise to make all things new give us strength to fight injustice or relieve suffering today?

3. What are we on earth for? (Eccl. 12:9-14)

⁹ Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. ¹⁰ The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

¹¹ The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. ¹² My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

What are we on earth for? Attempts to answer this question are at every turn. This text reminds us that countless opinions are offered up regarding this issue (v. 12). Think of all the different philosophies and perspectives on life and why we are here. Talk shows, magazines, blogs, and websites bombard us with advice and counsel on how to live. But unless they conclude that we were made for God and His commands, they are wrong and should be rejected. Deep down, every human knows that they were made for God.

Romans 1 reminds us that all people possess knowledge of God. The problem is not that we lack truth and knowledge; we suppress truth. Paul wrote, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom. 1:22-23). This is a grim commentary on humanity. God made us to know Him and walk in His ways, but instead, we shun Him and create our own path to joy and meaning. We essentially know why we are here, but we refuse to act on that truth.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

1. General Revelation

General revelation refers to God revealing Himself through His creation (Ps. 19) and through the human conscience (Rom. 2). Knowledge about God through general revelation is limited because it only communicates general knowledge about God and His character. We can look at the vastness and fine-tuning of the universe and recognize that God is all-powerful and wise, or look inward to our innate sense of right and wrong and know there is a moral lawgiver in the universe. General revelation is not sufficient for understanding how to know God or be saved, but it provides enough knowledge about God for us to be held accountable for suppressing God’s truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1–2).



What are some different answers the world gives to the question “What are we on earth for”?

As Christians, we have a tremendous opportunity to offer hope to our world. We know why we are here! We know why we were put on this earth. We know the path to ultimate meaning and purpose. We have a living Savior who came to give us abundant life and overflowing joy (John 10:10; 15:11).

We don't simply offer the world ideas, information, or a philosophy. We offer the world a Person, a Person who died and rose again. We offer living hope, living water, and living bread in a reigning King named Jesus. Only in Christ do we discover why we are here.



What are some unique ways Jesus provides a better answer than the world to life's deepest questions?

Voices from the Church

"The knowledge and wisdom that we find in Christ, and in Christ alone, are not to be treated casually or flippantly or presumptuously. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:4-6) is a treasure of infinite worth and value. Ponder it deeply. Pray for it daily. Plunder its riches. Protect it from defilement. Penetrate its mysteries. Prize it above all earthly wealth, all human wisdom, all fleshly gain."⁴

—Sam Storms

Conclusion

In this session, we saw that the Bible doesn't shy away from hard questions. God wants us to grapple with issues of meaning, purpose, and justice in the world. And when we do, we'll see that these questions help us see the uniqueness of Christianity and the glory of Jesus Christ our Savior. This, in turn, makes us even more conversant with the culture around us as we seek to offer answers to the deepest questions people are asking. Let us boldly but winsomely offer the world the hope it so desperately needs.

CHRIST CONNECTION: Ecclesiastes raises questions about life that can be answered only in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul declared that apart from the resurrection of Jesus, our faith is meaningless and there is no forgiveness of sins (1 Cor. 15:17). But because the resurrection is true, our life has purpose.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to discover the questions people in our culture are asking and then to answer those questions with the gospel.

1. List some reasons people might have a pessimistic view of life. How does the gospel give meaning, purpose, and hope in spite of these reasons?

2. How can our group/church fight injustice or relieve suffering in Jesus' name in an area of our community?

3. What changes will you make in your life in order to "fear God and keep his commandments"?

The Gospel Project[®]

Adult Personal Study Guide ESV
Volume 4, Number 4 Summer 2016

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Printed in the United States of America

The Gospel Project[®]: *Adult Personal Study Guide* ESV
(ISSN 2330-9393; Item 005573553) is published
quarterly by LifeWay Christian Resources,
One LifeWay Plaza, Nashville, TN 37234,
Thom S. Rainer, President. © 2016 LifeWay
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