

October 14-18, 2024 Edition

Following

The Year^(s) Of Jesus Part 145

Is Life Really Meaningless?

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: These reflections are actually from 2018. We were transitioning out of a series on wisdom and had just finished with the book of Proverbs and then started on the book of Ecclesiastes. I have to admit- when I decided to make 2018 the year of wisdom I almost chose to leave this book out. I've never done a lesson on Ecclesiastes in the 19 years I've been preaching, let alone an entire series on it. But I decided that if 2018 was going to be a tough year (and I knew it would be) then why not take on one of the most unique books in all of scripture?

And Ecclesiastes is possibly the most unique book in all of the Bible. I always thought of it as being the bleakest, most disillusioning and discouraging book in God's word. I have held it at arm's length for most of my career but that stops this year. This year we're going to spend 6 weeks looking at the book that starts like this:

These are the words of the Teacher, King David's son, who ruled in Jerusalem. "Everything is meaningless," says the Teacher, "completely meaningless!" What do people get for all their hard work under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth never changes. The sun rises and the sun sets, then hurries around to rise again. The wind blows south, and then turns north. Around and around it goes, blowing in circles. Rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full. Then the water returns again to the rivers and flows out again to the sea. Everything is wearisome beyond description. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content. History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. Sometimes people say, "Here is something new!" But actually it is old; nothing is ever truly new. We don't remember what happened in the past, and in future generations, no one will remember what we are doing now. I, the Teacher, was king of Israel, and I lived in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to search for understanding and to explore by wisdom everything being done under heaven. I soon discovered that God has dealt a tragic existence to the human race. I observed everything going on under the sun, and really, it is all meaningless-like chasing the wind. What is wrong cannot be made right. What is missing cannot be recovered. I said to myself, "Look, I am wiser than any of the kings who ruled in Jerusalem before me. I have greater wisdom and knowledge than any of them." So I set out to learn everything from wisdom to madness and folly. But I learned firsthand that pursuing all this is like chasing the wind. The greater my wisdom, the greater my grief. To increase knowledge only increases sorrow.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18 (NLT)

So- how are you feeling having read the entire first chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes? Not great probably. It's very much like the weather we've been experiencing here in south central Alaska this spring- not very springy. Why, oh why is this book in the Bible? And why, oh why are we spending 6 weeks in it? Well, one reason is because I don't think we would survive any longer than 6 weeks. And also because in this book of 12 chapters we find the 6 toughest questions that humans have to wrestle with in their lives. We will start this week with the question that sort of flavors the other 5- the question of meaning. Where can I find meaning in this world that too often seems cruel and senseless?

So spend today thinking about where you find meaning in your life and then we'll let Solomon smash our beliefs into tiny bits before he rebuilds them into something that will withstand any storm this life may throw at us. Which is important because as we've seen just in the last year- life can produce some pretty ferocious storms.

Tuesday Reflection: The first thing we have to do if we're going to understand the book of Ecclesiastes is define some terms. What I've learned during my preparation for this series is that I've largely misunderstood Ecclesiastes because I misunderstood what the book was all about at its core. So the first word we need to define is the name of the book itself- Ecclesiastes:

These are the words of the Teacher... Ecclesiastes 1:1 (NLT)

Do you see the word "teacher" in verse 1? In Greek that word is, "Ecclesiastes" and it is most often translated as "teacher". But this book wasn't written in Greek originally- it was written in Hebrew. In the Hebrew language the word that is used to describe whose words this book contains is the word, Qohelet. That word is not as easy to translate as the Greek word Ecclesiastes. In fact, it's a pretty mysterious word. Some translations render this word as "teacher" (in fact more modern translations go with "teacher") but it's not the only attempt to deal with this strange word:

The author: Solomon of Jerusalem, King David's son, "The Preacher." Ecclesiastes 1:1 (TLB)

Some older translations use the word, "preacher" to describe the author. But most new translations avoid that descriptor. Why? Because of the purpose of preaching. The word "preacher" literally means "one who brings the good news", and as you saw if you read chapter one yesterday, that is NOT what Solomon is doing here. In fact, he's doing anything but bringing good news. In the Message paraphrase that word is translated like this:

These are the words of the Quester, David's son and king in Jerusalem. Ecc. 1:1 (MSG)

The Quester. Eugene Peterson (the translator of the Message paraphrase of the Bible) sees Solomon playing the part of an adventurer on an adventure/quest for truth or meaning. But that seems to me to fall short as well (not that any of these scholars that have devoted their lives to learning and translating the scriptures are losing any sleep over the fact that Ed Gardner disagrees with their choice of titles for the author- in fact they don't even know who I am and wouldn't care if they did just to be completely honest about it ;o)

I read a couple of commentaries that suggested the word, Qohelet, would best be translated as "professor" because it seems like what he's doing is running a graduate level philosophy seminar on meaning. If you've ever been part of one of those seminars then you know that the professor doesn't really provide the class with any answers but rather presents the students with questions for them to wrestle with.

And that is exactly what Ecclesiastes is doing. In the book of Ecclesiastes Solomon is raising the question of meaning and then anticipating every possible pat answer humans have come up with to describe where human meaning can be found. And once

the professor brings up those anticipated answers he tears them apart before the students very eyes. It seems very bleak indeed but I no longer think that we need to see the book of Ecclesiastes that way. In fact, it's not the way I see it at all anymore. Is it different than the rest of the Bible? You bet. VERY different. This book raises all the questions of life without really offering any answers leaving the rest of the Bible to answer all the questions the professor has raised. The purpose of the book of Ecclesiastes to me is to show us how woefully inadequate our naive answers to what the meaning of life is and point us to God (which he will do briefly at the end of the book- sorry if you don't like spoilers ;o) who Solomon will tell us is the only One Who can provide the meaning we seek.

Wednesday Reflection: Ok so yesterday we talked about how Ecclesiastes is not a sermon brought by a preacher or even a lesson taught by a teacher- it's a graduate level philosophy seminar taught by a philosophy professor who is NOT answering questions but rather raising the toughest questions a human has to wrestle with in this life and then suggesting all of our possible answers only to then shred them to pieces and stomp all over them. It's a book that is INTENDED to leave us asking the question, "so where can meaning be found?"

Today I want to spend a few minutes talking about another word that pops up in this book over and over again- the word "hevel". Now, I know you don't know what that word is (unless you've done some pretty in depth study into this book)- it's a Hebrew word that like the word we looked at yesterday is translated into English in LOTS of different ways (which is a big clue that a Biblical word with all its nuance and depth is almost impossible to translate into English with a single word).

The word "hevel" is found 38 times in the 12 chapters of Ecclesiastes. It is rendered into English in several different ways:

- "Everything is meaningless," says the Teacher, "completely meaningless!" Ecc. 1:2 (NLT)
- In my opinion, nothing is worthwhile; everything is futile. Ecclesiastes 1:2 (TLB)
- Useless! Useless! Completely useless! Everything is useless. Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NCV)

Meaningless, futile and useless are just three of the words used to describe the Hebrew word "hevel". All three of those words suggest slightly different meanings but then you start getting into some of the other words used and things start getting foggy:

Vanity of vanities... all is vanity. Ecclesiastes 1:2 (KJV)

Vanity? How does that word fit in with meaningless, futile and useless? Growing up I only heard the Bible quoted in the King James English so I heard this phrase, "vanity of vanities- all is vanity" quite often. I didn't know what it meant but I can remember thinking about this white table my sister had that would flip open and had a mirror in it so she could get ready in the morning and do all the mysterious stuff girls did that I didn't comprehend at all. I can remember wondering how that table fit in with Ecclesiastes? Spoiler alert- it doesn't. In fact I

still struggle trying to figure out how vanity and meaningless are related. I mean, kind of, I guess I can see it but still is that what Solomon is trying to get us to see? Is he saying the same thing Carly Simon said when she exclaimed, "you're so vain. I bet you think this song is about you" (which I'm guess that whoever she was talking about did think that song was about him especially after she not-so-subtly mentioned it in her song)?

I don't know about you but I'm still a little fuzzy on what "hevel" means. So let's look at this word in the Message paraphrase of the Bible:

Smoke, nothing but smoke... There's nothing to anything-it's all smoke. Ecc. 1:2 (MSG)

And here I think we start to get closer to what Solomon was trying to get across. The word "hevel" in Hebrew literally meant smoke or vapor. If you spotted smoke you would point to it and say, "look- it's hevel. And where there's hevel there's fire!" The word could also be used to describe vapor. Maybe the best way I read to explain this word is to picture children chasing after bubbles in a park. I remember thinking to myself that if I could just catch one my life would be complete. But as soon as I caught one it was gone. It looked so alluring but it was in fact, empty.

That's "hevel". Solomon isn't really saying everything is meaningless- he's really saying that the things we think will bring us meaning are actually like bubbles. They look so alluring and we think if we could just catch these things (whatever they may be and we'll be talking about these things in coming days and weeks but here's a short list- love of a particular person, enough money, enough security or power or success, enough good deeds...) then our lives would be complete. But just like with bubbles when we finally catch them we will find that they are "hevel" in and of themselves. There's nothing wrong with them- in fact they can be part of what makes our lives filled with true meaning so sweet. But they make a horrible foundation for our lives. They can't stand up under the weight of human meaning and so they crumble beneath our feet.

That's "hevel" and it's going to be important to remember that Solomon isn't saying the different philosophies about where to find meaning in this world are meaningless- rather they're empty like a bubble and if you build your life solely on these philosophies then they will make your life meaningless. It's a subtle line but it's an important one if we're going to understand this seminar in philosophy that the professor is leading us in.

Thursday Reflection: Disclaimer- I am NOT a philosopher in the sense that I've been trained and educated to the extent that I probably should be to dare to even broach the subject of philosophy in this reflection. My definitions and grasp of philosophy will more than likely seem extremely naive and ignorant to anyone who has studied it a lot but that never stopped me before from stomping into a subject I might be wiser to not tread into- so you've been warned- AMATEUR PHILOSOPHER ALERT!!!!!! ;o)

In fact just to show you how true this is I'll tell you my favorite Rene Descartes joke (ok- it's my only Rene Descartes joke ;o)- Rene Descartes goes into a bar and the bartender asks him if he wants a drink and Descartes says, "I think not" and poof! He disappears. If you don't get it you'll have to read to the end where I will explain it.

So we now know that in Ecclesiastes we're dealing with a professor leading a graduate level philosophy seminar in which he destroys every human answer to the question, "where can I find the meaning upon which to build my life?" We also know that the word "hevel" (which is used 38 times in the book) doesn't really mean "meaningless" but rather means "empty". Today we look at a third term that we have to understand in order to move forward in the book of Ecclesiastes if we're going to understand it and that term is, under-the-sun.

Solomon uses this term 19 times in this book and it's not used anywhere else in the entire Old Testament. Over and over Solomon refers to this idea of under-the-sun:

What do people gain for all their hard work under the sun? Ecclesiastes 1:3 (NLT)

I used to think that Solomon was saying that all hard work is meaningless. But that's not what he's saying at all- what he is saying is that work that is done "under the sun" (as opposed to above the sun meaning heaven and all spiritual reality) if done solely for what exists down here and to the exclusion of God will truly be meaningless and empty.

Under-the-sun isn't a geographical location for Solomon so much as it is a state of mind- a reason for being. Remember, this whole book is looking at the question of meaning. What is the purpose of human life and what can a human build their lives upon that will satisfy our hunger for meaning? After asking this question then Solomon brings up every anticipated human answer- and destroys them.

One human philosophy suggests that people can find their meaning in living a good life and doing good even though what exists under-the-sun is all there is. This school of philosophy is called "humanism" and is defined this way by the American Humanist Society:

Humanism is a progressive lifestance that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead meaningful, ethical lives capable of adding to the greater good of humanity.

In other words- there is nothing but what exists under-the-sun but we can still lead meaningful lives if we have integrity and live ethically by leaving the world a better place than we found it. Solomon rips this philosophy to shreds over and over in the pages of Ecclesiastes (and we'll spend more time dealing with this in coming weeks). Basically what Solomon says is, "you can find meaning in humanism and living a good life... as long as you don't think about it too much. But if you scratch the surface of humanism you'll find a bleak world filled with discouragement, disillusionment and zero hope:

Generations come and generations go, but the earth never changes. Ecclesiastes 1:4 (NLT)

In other words, nothing you do will leave this world a better place. Nothing is new and nothing changes so why bother? Next he brings up hedonism which is the philosophy defined as:

A hedonist is "a person who believes that the pursuit of pleasure is the most important thing in life; a pleasure-seeker".

In other words, I can find meaning in the simple pleasures of life. Hedonism got a bad reputation back in the 1970s when people saw what it looked like to take hedonism to its logical extreme conclusion but the basic idea seems pretty solid- I'll find meaning by enjoying

a good book, a glass of wine, a good meal, the love of my family... Solomon destroys this philosophy as well:

Everything is wearisome beyond description. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied. No matter how much we hear, we are not content. Ecclesiastes 1:8 (NLT)

In other words- it's never enough when you start down this road. In the end it will just be a like a big bubble that you've caught- totally empty- smoke. Really Solomon is the first existentialist. Existentialism is a school of philosophy that has been around for a few hundred years and most people consider Søren Kierkegaard to the founder but long before modern existentialists were shredding the arguments of every human school of philosophy and telling everyone that there is zero meaning that can be found in this life Solomon had already done the same thing. The existentialists told the humanists and the hedonists that they could choose to try to find meaning in living a good life or simply enjoying their lives and it might actually work. For a while. As long as you don't think about it too much. They agreed that under-the-sun is all there is but they disagreed that any meaning could be found down here. And since there is no God there is no hope of ever finding meaning on this earth (the existentialists were not invited to a lot of parties I imagine ;o)

CS Lewis has an essay in Mere Christianity where he talks about human hungers. He basically says that we get thirsty and need something to quench that thirst, thank goodness such a thing as water exists in this universe to quench our thirst. We get hungry and need something to satisfy that hunger- thank goodness there exists such a thing as food in our universe. Isn't it odd that we hunger and thirst for meaning and yet are told (by those who believe under-the-sun is all there is) that there is nothing to satisfy this hunger that eats at all of us?

And that's one thing that really bothers the existentialists. A famous philosopher named Albert Camus found this particularly troubling. He couldn't explain it. It didn't lead him to believe that there must be something above-the-sun that could satisfy this hunger but he did admit that he couldn't think of another single thing in human existence where we hunger for something that doesn't exist in the universe.

Solomon would say- right. Exactly. If under-the-sun is all there is then we are doomed to lead meaningless lives. But (and as a friend of mine likes to say, this is a very-big-but) Solomon does give us a couple of gleams of hope in this book of Ecclesiastes- he tells us that there is someplace that hope and meaning can be found if we search for it there and we'll talk about that tomorrow.

Now for the Descartes joke I told earlier. Rene Descartes is most famous (in philosophy) for making the statement, "I think, therefore I am." In other words he only knew he exists because he knows he thinks. So when he says, "I think not" it makes him disappear. Get it? Hey- I didn't say it was a funny Rene Descartes joke- just my favorite Rene Descartes joke.

Friday Reflection: Alright- we've spent the first four days of this week looking at the bleak outlook of the professor. We've seen that there is nothing under-the-sun that can satisfy the deep hunger we humans have for meaning or hold up under the sheer weight of that thirst. So is there any hope to be had at all? Yes.

Like I said earlier in the week- Ecclesiastes is different than every other book in the Bible. It give almost zero answers and instead raises all the toughest questions we must wrestle with in this life and then shreds every answer to those questions that exists under-the-sun (apart from God- if you don't know what I'm talking about go back and read Thursday's reflection). Really, if you were going to suggest the order in which the Bible should be read by educated adults my list would now start with Ecclesiastes and then proceed to the gospel of John and the book of James. Those two books especially give the answers to every question that the professor asks- especially the question of meaning.

Solomon was not the first philosopher (or the last) to shred humanity's answers to where meaning can be found under-the-sun. If you know anything about Greek philosophy then you know the Greeks looked for meaning everywhere and anywhere. By the time the first century comes along the philosophers in the ancient world were pretty disillusioned. Humanism (living a good life), hedonism (enjoying the simple pleasures of this life) and every other "ism" that had been tried had been shown to be hevel (if you don't know what I mean by "hevel" go back and read Wednesday's reflection ;o) or empty. New philosophies like cynicism, skepticism and stoicism arose to say, "there is no meaning so here's what we're going to try in order to survive this senseless existence that will end when our hearts stop beating.

The philosophers would argue about the "logos" of a human. That word "logos" is translated into English as "word" but it's much deeper than that. What the philosophers meant by a person's logos was their purpose- where they would find meaning. And it wasn't just about people- if you asked about a hammer's "logos" you would be told it was to drive nails. The logos of a saw was to cut wood. If you tried to use something outside of its logos you were bound to failure and misery (as well as some broken tools). The philosophers could pinpoint the logos of a tool but they were stumped when it came to the logos of a person. For the most part it was universally agreed upon by the philosophers of the first century that a human had no logos.

Then Jesus was born. And He said it was not so. A human does have a logos- a purpose. A place we could find meaning in this life. And it wasn't a system or a philosophy- it was a person:

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. John 1:1-5 (NLT)

This is mind bending. Our logos (purpose and reason for life- the place we can find meaning) is THE LOGOS. Jesus (according to the Bible) is the only place you and I will ever find meaning- And Solomon told us it was so- sort of:

Here now is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is everyone's duty. God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad. Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NLT)

That's the last line of the book of Ecclesiastes and it's one of the few rays of hope in the entire book. It used to just sound scary to me but that's not how it's supposed to sound to us. This is supposed to be a defiant YES screamed into a meaningless existence under-the-sun. Solomon isn't saying we just need to be scared of God and do everything He says and even then we're going to get judged so what's the point. He's saying there is a purpose to this life. He's saying life isn't cyclical (which is what he pointed out over and over again is what it looks like if all you're paying attention to is what's under-the-sun) but linear. That there's a purpose and meaning to this world and there's a purpose and meaning to your little life- and mine too. There will be a day when God will set everything right and all the senseless cruelty that exists under-the-sun will be defeated and shown to be the loser in this cosmic battle for the lives of men.

So don't fall for the lie that under-the-sun is all there is. Even we as Christians can be dominated by life under-the-sun. It's a HUGE part of what Jesus is fighting during His time on this earth and it's a HUGE part of what the entire Bible is about- don't fall for the illusion that this is all there is. Yes it's devastating when the seeming senseless cruelty of this world deals our hopes and dreams for life under-the-sun a blow. It's not wrong to hurt. But don't let it distract you from the fact that you have a logos (and a LOGOS) and there is nothing under-the-sun that can steal that from you- unless you let it.

So when life under-the-sun gets tough remember- even Jesus (our LOGOS) dealt with this cruel life under-the-sun. And defeated it. Now it's our turn.

I have told you these things so you can have peace in me. In this world you will have trouble. But be brave for I have defeated the world! John 16:33 (NCV)

We'll continue with the other 5 toughest questions of existence next week but never forget that your destiny and your heritage is one of courage and power and meaning and purpose and as we'll see next week- joy and happiness (but we'll have to define happiness).

Oh yeah- just a tiny bit of bonus information. Remember the Bible trumpeting that Jesus was the logos? Well there was a philosophical school called the gnostics (the knowing ones) who claimed faith in Jesus but rejected that He had come in the flesh. They considered the flesh to be dirty and evil (a greek philosophy- not a Biblical one) and so they reasoned, Jesus couldn't have come in the flesh. The basically argued that Jesus was "hevel" or empty. He appeared to have human form but it was a trick, an illusion. Well John couldn't stand that idea. He had spent 3 1/2 years with Jesus and he wanted to make sure we knew He was literally and physically present as a human on this earth. So his gospel goes out of its way to emphasize that Jesus ate and was seen and- touched:

We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. 1 John 1:1 (NLT)

We touched Him with our own hands. In other words, "HE WAS NOT HEVEL!!!!!"

Ok, that's all I wanted to point out. Because I think that's cool.

Jesus is awesome!