

“Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is Meaningless!”
The Message of Ecclesiastes?

Ecclesiastes 1:1 – 2:

“The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” Says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

Ecclesiastes 2:11:

“Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.”

Ecclesiastes 9:9:

“Enjoy life with your spouse, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun— all your meaningless days.”

Ecclesiastes 11:8:

“However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless.”

Ecclesiastes 11:10:

“So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are meaningless.”

Introduction

Are you feeling encouraged this morning?

Who would like King Solomon as their next church camp or Christian conference speaker?

A few weeks back we took some time to examine the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible.

As we did so we looked at the key themes, because Revelation has often been both misunderstood and misused in Christian circles.

So this morning I felt that it would good to look at another book of the Bible that can seem a bit out of place – which is Ecclesiastes.

It's a book that's very philosophical and reflective *and* had the reputation of being a real downer.

The book is Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon, the son of David who killed the giant Goliath.

And whereas the Revelation had multiple themes, Ecclesiastes has one repeated theme throughout which can be simply summarized as this:

Life is meaningless

Solomon seems fixated on the meaninglessness of life.

The word “meaningless” itself occurs 32 times in the NIV translation of the Bible.

If these words are correct, King Solomon was no motivational speaker.

Toil, labour, work, youth, marriage, the future are all meaningless.

So you have to ask yourself, what is going on here?

As you can probably already tell, the book of Ecclesiastes has caused quite a few headaches throughout the centuries.

It doesn't seem to fit in with the rest of the Bible's teaching on the fact that life and all that is in it are a gift from God.

Therefore a lot of time and thought has been exerted to try and find a way to make Ecclesiastes more palatable.

Are there any suggestions to make sense of this?

“How would you explain the message of Ecclesiastes?”

Tell the person next to you.

Some have started with the Bible itself.

Some versions try to get around the problem of a meaningless life by using a different word.

In doing so problems just as big are created.

For example in the Good News Bible we read *“Useless! Useless! Life is useless, all useless.”*

The Contemporary English Version states *“Nothing makes sense!*

Everything is nonsense. I have seen it all – nothing makes sense!”

Others have said it not the words of Ecclesiastes that are the problem but the way in which we read it.

We have to understand, we are told, that it was written by King Solomon at a time in his life when he was far away from God.

If you read the story of King Solomon, as wise as he was, intermarried with women who worshipped false gods, and we're told that "when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God".¹

As he comes to the end of his days on Earth, Solomon reflects on life without God, and gets depressed.

Hence when you do read Ecclesiastes there seems to be such a pessimistic tone.

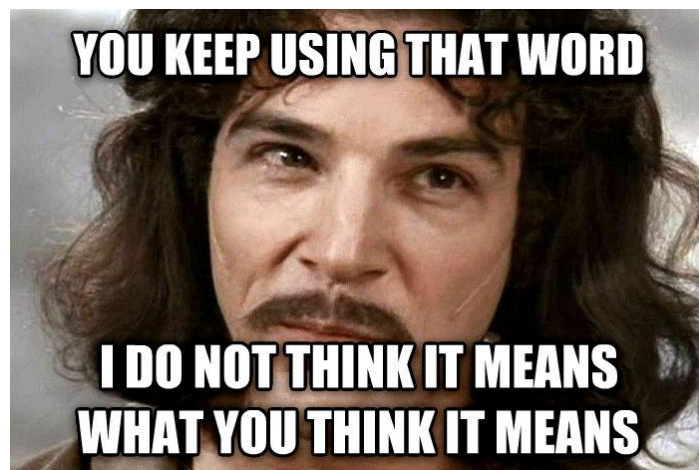
Life without God is therefore *"Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!"*

Yet I think this is unfair on a number of levels.

For one thing there are many people who do not follow Christ would say they have very meaningful lives quite apart from God.

And there are followers of Jesus who at times struggle with meaning in their lives. And on closer scrutiny of Ecclesiastes itself, God is still very much in the picture. In fact God is referred to over 40 times!

Where, then, can we gain some insight?



Well, it's when we begin to explore the Hebrew language (the original language of Ecclesiastes) that I think that a whole new dimension of understanding opens up.

¹ 1 Kings 11:1 – 8

The Hebrew word translated as “meaningless” in the NIV and “vanity” in the King James is “hebel”.

The thing is there are very few versions of the Bible that seem to translate *hebel* literally.

When *hebel* is translated literally it is “vapour” or “puff of smoke”.

Verse 2 of chapter one (where we find the theme of Ecclesiastes) then becomes:
“A puff of smoke! A puff of smoke! Utterly a puff of smoke!
Everything is a puff of smoke!”

I don’t think was he thinking life is meaningless.
I think his point was that life, like a puff of smoke, is here for a moment and then gone.

Just like this candle here.
When I blow it out... the puff of smoke doesn’t last.

Life isn’t *meaningless* to King Solomon; **it is temporary, transitory, momentary, fleeting, short-lived.**

In case you’re not convinced, there is one place where the NIV does translate *hebel* in this way.

The last chapter in Proverbs (just before Ecclesiastes) and verse 30, which talks about a wife of noble character.

“Charm is deceptive, and beauty is [hebel] fleeting.”

The word used here as “fleeting” is the word translated as “meaningless” in Ecclesiastes.

The verses that were read earlier really do take on new meaning.

“So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are **fleeting**.”

“Enjoy life with your spouse, whom you love, all the days of this **brief** life that God has given you under the sun— all your **short-lived** days.”

And verse 2 of Ecclesiastes chapter 1, the theme of the entire book, can rightly be read as :

“Fleeting! Fleeting!” Says the Teacher. “Utterly temporary! Everything is transient!”

Or as we might say, everything is here today, gone tomorrow.

Taken alone – separate from the rest of Scripture – the message of Ecclesiastes is *not* that life is meaningless or futile but that it is *fleeting and transitory*.

Because life is so fleeting Solomon makes some startling recommendations.

*“Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favours what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil.”*²

That’s an ancient way of saying “Have a good time!”

Enjoy the moment because we don’t know when the moment might change.

This hit home some years ago.

I pretty much thought that my parents would be around forever.
Not in the sense that I thought that they were immortal.
But I guess because life goes on as it does sometimes, you assume that things will always be as they have been.
Then on April 29th 2005, my mother was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer.
Suddenly you *do* realise how temporary things can be.

The time spent with my mum and the rest of my family is very special.

Time together is to be celebrated because we don’t know how long that time is going to be.

The present matters and is worth celebrating.

Yet although we are to celebrate the present we mustn’t let the present dictate to our lives and blind us to the reality of the eternal.

Solomon warns that although we can “Follow the ways of our heart and whatever our eyes see,... know that for all these things God will bring you to judgement.”

Jesus once told a story about a rich farmer.³

““One day this farmer grew a gigantic crop far beyond his normal expectations.

He thought to himself: “What can I do? My current barns aren’t big enough for this huge harvest.”

So he decided, “Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones.

² Ecclesiastes 9:7 – 9

³ Luke 12 v 13 – 21:

Then I'll gather in all my goods and all my grain, and I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain and goods laid up for many years to come. I can take life easy. As the saying goes I eat, drink and be merry." ' "Yet just at that moment God showed up and said, "Fool! Tonight you will die. And everything that you've stored up for yourself – who will get it?' And Jesus he finished that story with these words: "This is how it will be with those who store up things for themselves but are not rich toward God."

We live in a world where the majority has their eyes solely on the present, at least in the Western world.

The tragedy is that they will suddenly find one day that there is more than this.

Solomon's pessimism is not that life is meaningless but that nothing seems to last. Yet at the same time he had an inkling, that because of who God is, there had to be something more.

So we find this simple phrase in Ecclesiastes chapter 3 verse 11:

"He [God] has put eternity in the hearts of men."

When Jesus came that inkling about eternity became clear.

Jesus said:

"I am the resurrection and the life.

Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

And then Jesus asked a crucial question:

"Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this?

What Solomon only had an inkling of, Jesus makes as plain as day.

What Solomon only had an inkling of, Jesus could guarantee.

Jesus made eternity possible and available through relationship with Himself.

That relationship with Jesus is found by placing our trust in Him to be our Leader and Forgiver.

We enter into relationship with Jesus by first admitting that we've blown it.

Despite our best intentions and attempts, we get it wrong. We hurt others and offend God. We get life right sometimes and yet a lot of the time we are just so adept at stuffing things up.

We are so in need of forgiveness. Jesus came and died on the cross and rose from death so that we could be forgiven.

Believing also means we receive Jesus as our Leader.
That means as it sounds – Jesus now takes the lead in our lives.
We follow Him as He leads us and calls us.
We live our lives in view of what He taught in the Bible.

We enter into a relationship where Jesus comes first.

When we have Jesus as our Leader and Forgiver we are given eternity as well.

Conclusion

What then, is the real message of Ecclesiastes?

The real message of Ecclesiastes is that life is not meaningless or futile, but that ***we are to live celebrating the present with our eyes on eternity.***

Realising that our present moments are fleeting, life is to be celebrated and enjoyed.

So my takeaways are very simple, I think.

The first: this life isn't the only one we will ever live.

Do you know, really know, Jesus as your Leader and Forgiver, the only One who can guarantee eternity?

The second is this: are there opportunities, open doorways that need to be walked through, conversations that need to be had in this moment.

Some years ago a nurse working in palliative care wrote a book on the five regrets people have at the end of their lives.
She asked if there were any regrets they had or anything they would do differently?

From that 5 themes emerged:

- **“I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.”**
- **“I wish I hadn't worked so hard.”**
- **“I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.”**
- **“I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.”**
- **“I wish that I had let myself be happier.”**