

Sermon Title: THE MEANING OF LIFE (Jesus In The Writings)

Sermon Text: Ecclesiastes

Date: January 14, 2016 (New Beginnings Baptist)

Intro

So once again we will turn to the Old Testament, and this time to the section of the arrangement of the Old Testament in Jesus' day known as the *Ketuvim* (the writings). For us, we call this the poetic literature. Whatever arrangement we consider, what is important is that we preach Christ from it. I came across a helpful little article while I was preparing for this message published at the Gospel Coalition website by Jeff Robinson entitled *Six Questions Preachers Should Ask Of Every Sermon*. The first question is "Does it help the congregation understand the Bible better?" The second question is "Does it show them Christ." He then goes on to say: "If I do not show them the Christ, in both his glorious person and work, in his glorious offices, then in what way is my preaching strictly Christian? None but Jesus can do helpless sinners good."¹ So again, what I plan to do is preach Christ from the Old Testament. Last time we looked at Genesis where we learn about the beginning of life. Today we will go to one of my favourite books, Ecclesiastes, and learn about the meaning of life. Martin Luther, the great reformer, said this about Ecclesiastes: "This book is...one which no one has ever completely mastered. Indeed, it has been so distorted by the miserable commentaries of many writers that it is almost a bigger job to purify and defend the author from the notions which they have smuggled into him than it is to show his real meaning."² A few years ago my son read through Ecclesiastes and discovered what Luther had, for Travis' response to it was: "That was the hardest book of the Bible I have ever read." I think it is for these two reasons that Sidney Greidanus, a commentator that has been of great value to me in understanding how to preach Christ in the Old Testament, says: "Small wonder that many preachers consider it the better part of wisdom to omit Ecclesiastes from their preaching schedule."³ Well, there are no doubt some difficulties to interpreting and understanding Ecclesiastes, a point which will be proved before we get past the first verse, but as I desperately intend to show today, we can (and must) understand this important book which God preserved for His glory and our good because in it we learn about Christ and the meaning of life. But before we get into the content of the book, first we must cover some introductory matters. So we will discuss some of the context of Ecclesiastes, then we will look at the content, then last but not least, we will discuss Christ.

1. The Context (Eccl 1:1)

a. The Author

Now whenever we consider any writing we want to know who the author is. Of course God is the author of all Scripture, but He wrote it through the pen of a human author. Through a fallen and sinful man, carried along by the Holy Spirit (**2 Peter 1:21**), the text of Ecclesiastes was written so that we can now read and benefit from it (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**). But just who was that human author who God used to record Ecclesiastes? Well, we find identification in the first verse

¹ <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/6-questions-preachers-should-ask-of-every-sermon>

² Luther, Martin. *Notes on Ecclesiastes*, 1532, in *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1972), vol. 15, p.7. Quoted by Walter Kaiser (*Coping with Change: Ecclesiastes*, Christian Focus Publishing, Scotland, 2013, p.20).

³ Griedanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010, p.1.

where we read: “*The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem*” (**Ecc1 1:1**). Now here we find our first interpretive difficulty, the title which is given to the author. The word in the original language is *Qoheleth*, a derivative of the Hebrew word *Qahal*, from which through the Greek tongue we get the word *Ekklesia*, which then led to Ecclesiastes. Both *Qahal* and *Ekklesia* are defined as assembly or gathering, and thus while most translators choose either “preacher” (**ESV, KJV, NASB**) or “teacher” (**HCSB, NIV**) to identify the author, I think Walter Kaiser is more on the mark when he says that it should be translated as “something more like ‘Convener or the ‘Assembler’ of the group.”⁴ So, the one who wrote this book was someone who held an official role among God’s people and had both the ability and the authority to call the people together to address them. This then fits with what we discover next, namely that the author was a descendant of David who thus at some point occupied the throne of David. Now some have concluded that narrowing it down to which descendant of David it was is not so easy (seeing as there are 21 options). I, along with several scholars, agree with the overwhelming testimony of church history, that it is really not as difficult as some have suggested. You see, we have more than just this opening verse to help us figure out the author, we have 12 chapters which include information which I believe makes clear who the author is. First, the author was wiser than any before him (**Ecc1 1:16**), something said of only one of David’s descendants (**1 Kings 3:12**). Second, the author was wealthier than all who came before (**Ecc1 2:4-9**), again something said only about one of David’s descendants (**1 Kings 10:23**). Third, the author wrote many proverbs (**12:9-10**), again something which leads to only one king of Israel (**Prov 1:1**). Finally, and maybe most convincingly, the author was “*king over Israel from Jerusalem*” (**Ecc1 1:12**), which could apply only to one descendant of David, for after this man ruled Israel divided and no one ruled over all Israel from Jerusalem. These, and other criteria, make pretty clear in my estimation that there is only one appropriate candidate for author of Ecclesiastes: Solomon.

b. The Audience

This being the case, after a lengthy consideration of authorship, it will take only a second or two to figure out the audience, for if it was the king of Israel at that time who wrote Ecclesiastes, and it was the King of Israel who called the people together, then the audience was clearly Israel, God’s covenant people. Now whether it was nearer to the beginning of Solomon’s reign (970BC) or nearer to the end (930BC) or somewhere in the middle, it is hard to be absolutely sure. I think that given that the author seems like he has seen and done it all, experienced all the world has to offer, that it was likely written closer to the end of his reign. But more important than finding the answer to this, is finding the purpose for which Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes.

c. The Purpose

There is little difficulty in determining this work’s purpose for the author includes at least three things which he hopes to do through his writing, the first was to impart wisdom to his audience. Near the end of Ecclesiastes we read that “*the Preacher [...] taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care*” (**Ecc1 12:9**). That being said, Solomon, being a wise man himself, knew that to impart wisdom he would need to preach he truth, so the second reason Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes was to relay truth to his audience, as we read again in chapter 12 that Solomon “*Wrote words of truth*” (**Ecc1 12:10**). The last reason Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes was to encourage the worship of God, something that will become

⁴ Kaiser, Walter. *Coping with Change: Ecclesiastes*. Scotland: Christian Focus Publishing, 2013, p.36.

apparent after we consider the content of the book, especially near to the end. So with the author, audience and purpose out of the way let's get into the content.

2. The Content

a. Solomon's Question (Eccl 1:2)

As we move from verse one to verse two we find another difficulty in interpretation, namely, what is Solomon's assessment of this life, as we read:

"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Eccl 1:2).

This is Solomon's opening statement, one that we might accuse him of neglecting to give us a spoiler alert with. In other words, we do not yet know what Ecclesiastes is about, but we know how it ends, with Solomon determining that everything is vanity. Pretty depressing outlook on life, as commentator PHILIP RYKEN suggests, it is entirely likely that we "should think of Ecclesiastes as the only book of the Bible written on a Monday morning"⁵ But is everything vanity, because another translation has the preacher saying everything is "*meaningless*" (NIV), while another translation has that everything is "*absolute futility*" (HCSB). In the original language this word, "*Hebel*," literally means vapor, but its intended meaning here has troubled translators for centuries. If you take this word at face value, I think we can see how the above translations have come to be, yet jumping right to the English I think we lose some of what the original author intended. So, the preacher looks around at life and he replies that everything is vapor. Now what is the primary characteristic of a vapor? One minute it is here the next it is gone. Vapor is extremely transitory, which all though it does not sound terribly smooth has commentator Walter Kaiser suggesting that we translate verse two as "transition of transitions, everything is changing."⁶ Babies continue to be born, people continue to grow older, and people continue to die, and it all happens in what seems to us a blink of the eye. The question then becomes, well if everything is so transitory, if life is here one moment, gone the next, then what is the point? That, after all, is what I believe the author of Ecclesiastes is trying to answer: the age old question concerning the meaning of life. Solomon wants to know what he was put on this earth for, why he exists, what his purpose is. And so he sets out on a search for the answers to life's biggest questions. The rest of Ecclesiastes then is Solomon's journal in which he records all about his search for meaning, and the answer to this question:

"What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (Eccl 1:3).

Today we will consider only a portion of Solomon's journal, spending most of our time near the beginning, skipping over the middle then touching down at the end.

b. Solomon's Quest (Eccl 1:12-2:11)

Wisdom

Solomon's search for meaning begins at the library because he thought maybe the meaning of life was found in the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge. As he put it:

"And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven" (Eccl 1:13).

⁵ Ryken, Philip Graham. Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters (Preaching the Word Series), Kindle Edition. Wheaton: Crossway, 2010.

⁶ Kaiser, Walter. Coping with Change: Ecclesiastes. Scotland: Christian Focus Publishing, 2013, p.29.

This is where many still begin their search for meaning in life. One thing became clear to me almost immediately after we relocated to Halifax just over 6 years ago, namely, that it is a university town. According to a study conducted last year, in Nova Scotia alone in the year 2012 there were 45,480 individuals pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees through both full-time or part-time studies at an accredited university (this of course does not factor in all those students studying at community colleges or online). According to a study conducted a few years ago there were 150,010 full-time students pursuing graduate degrees at an accredited Canadian university, and when it comes to full-time students pursuing an undergrad degree the number was a whopping 834,640. Clearly the point being that a good number of Canadians see some value in the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, and I think we can safely assume that many are attempting to find meaning in life through that pursuit, just like Solomon. He engaged in a study of every subject under heaven: anthropology, astronomy, biology, geology, geography, philosophy, psychology, sociology, zoology, and any other ology you can think of. He wanted to know it all, all that is, that the natural man can know apart from God. His quest for meaning was purely and completely intellectual, for as he tells us throughout his journal some 26 times, his search took place “*under the sun*,” which is to say, on a horizontal level, from the perspective of the natural man.

Wine

But his search for meaning in a pursuit of wisdom and knowledge came up short, as he just couldn't know everything, for as he notes “*of making many books there is no end*” (**Ecc1 12:12**), so he moved on to the next place he thought he might find meaning in life, in a bottle of wine. For a time, Solomon adopted the philosophy of 70's rock band Trooper who sang: “We are here for a good time, not a long time.” As he says: “*I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine*” (**Ecclesiastes 2:3**). According to **1 Kings 4:25-27** when Solomon sat down at the table the spread was pretty impressive, and the selection and quantity of fine wines available to sample each evening were great so much so that the author says “*nothing was lacking*.”

Work

But when he had tasted every wine, and enjoyed the experience which comes from consumption of alcohol he determined that there must be more to life than this, so he poured all his efforts into work. There is a nice little summary of some of Solomon's architectural accomplishments in **1 Kings 9**, but let's hear in Solomon's own words how he searched for meaning in life through work:

“I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees” (**Ecc1 2:4-6**).

Wealth

But as with wisdom, and as with wine, pouring himself into work left him feeling empty yet again, even after the accomplishment of such mighty and impressive deeds as had not been seen before. So, after wisdom, wine and work left the great king feeling empty, he then turned to wealth. Oh, how he turned to wealth. In this case, Solomon's summary of his pursuit of wealth is far too modest, so let's listen to what the author of 1 Kings says about Solomon's riches:

Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was 666 talents (roughly 25 tons) of gold, besides that which came from the explorers and from the business of the merchants, and from all the kings of the west and from the governors of the land. King Solomon made 200 large

shields of beaten gold; 600 shekels (about 15 pounds) of gold went into each shield. And he made 300 shields of beaten gold; three minas (about 4 pounds) of gold went into each shield. And the king put them in the House of the Forest of Lebanon. The king also made a great ivory throne and overlaid it with the finest gold. The throne had six steps, and the throne had a round top, and on each side of the seat were armrests and two lions standing beside the armrests, while twelve lions stood there, one on each end of a step on the six steps. The like of it was never made in any kingdom. All King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. None were of silver; silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon. For the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks. Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. (1 Kings 10:15-23).

If Solomon had lived today he would not have had to line up for a Powerball Ticket. He would have made the contents of Bill Gate's bank account seem like the spare change you find behind the couch cushions. But alas, there was no amount of gold, no amount of possessions, no number of chariots which could satisfy. Solomon's pursuit of wealth left him with the same conclusion as Callie Rogers. Callie was a young lady from Cumbria, a county in the Northwest parts of England. The year was 2003 and young Callie, just old enough to drive, was the winner of a 1.9 million pound lottery prize, making her the youngest lottery jackpot winner in Britain. She begins by doing what you might think a 16 year old who comes into such a windfall would do, she starts spending: buying homes, vacations and cars for her loved ones, upgrading her wardrobe, and sparing no expense when it came to drugs and alcohol. But as Callie likely did not know, 3 million dollars can be spent a lot quicker than you would think, and within 6 years it was all but gone and her pursuit of meaning in wealth had come to an end. In an interview, after reportedly surviving two suicide attempts, Callie had this to say about her pursuit: "My life is a shambles and hopefully now [the money] has all gone I can find some happiness... It's brought me nothing but unhappiness. It's ruined my life."⁷ If only she had consulted Ecclesiastes before she won the lottery and she could have learned from Solomon that wealth does not provide meaning in life.

Women

So when the books have all been read, the wine has all been drunk, the work-day is done, and the wealth has been spent, there is only one last place for Solomon to turn: women, 1000 of them to be precise: 700 wives and 300 concubines (**1 Kings 11:3**). For those of you doing the math, that is a different woman every night for almost 3 years. Solomon made Hugh Hefner look like a choir boy, for when it came to sex he had what he wanted when he wanted it with whomever he wanted it with. As he puts it in Ecclesiastes he had "*many concubines, the delight of the sons of man*" (**Eccl 2:8**). Solomon searched the globe, high and low, for the meaning of life. Just listen to his summary of his search:

"So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil"
(**Eccl 2:9-10**).

⁷ <http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/11/28/500-million-powerball-jackpot-the-tragic-stories-of-the-lotterys-unluckiest-winners/slide/callie-rogers/>

c. Solomon's Theme

Solomon spared no expense when it concerned his search, but he looked for meaning in life in all the wrong places, and for that reason it is not surprising what he says about his search:

"Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (Eccl 2:11).

His search was a waste of time. Life was a waste of time. It was all vanity, meaningless, futility. Solomon makes Eeyore look optimistic in his outlook on life, doesn't he? If you had to pick a theme for the book of Ecclesiastes, it could appropriately be the meaninglessness of life.

Solomon begins his book by noting this and he ends it this way as well as in chapter 12 he says: *"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity" (Eccl 12:8)*. One might think that Solomon was an atheist, or at best an agnostic, if this was the substance of his message, but while the vanity of this life may be the prevailing theme of his book, it is not at all his conclusion. If it were, I reckon that preaching through it might please the makers and distributors of anti-depressants.

3. The Christ

a. No Meaning Apart From Christ

But it was not, not at all. Yes, Solomon had learned that a pursuit of meaning in the things of the world comes up absolutely empty. Yes, Solomon has discovered that life is transitory and that meaning cannot be found in worldly wisdom, wine, work, wealth or women. But while Solomon could not find meaning in these things, he did find the meaning of life. Meaning in life can be found, and there is a way that Solomon found to live in light of the transitory and seemingly futile nature of life, and it is to:

"fear God and keep His commands, for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl 12:13).

Life may seem short, and it is, and life may seem meaningless, and it is, life is meaningless ... without God. But with God there is meaning, there is purpose, there is a reason to live, and it is to worship Him, to fear Him, to trust Him, to obey Him, to live every moment that He gives you for Him and for His glory. Living for God is not simply one way to live, it is the only way. But there is a problem, namely that we cannot get to God. As Paul puts it

"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God" (Rom 3:10-11).

In other words, because we are sinners our search for meaning will not include seeking for God, which means we will look in all the wrong places, just like Solomon did. But there is good news today, for there is a way to God, and it is through Jesus who said,

"I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

Thus there is only way to get through this life the way we were intended to: Trust that Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, lived a perfect life, died a sacrificial death to atone for your sins, was buried and on the third day was raised for your justification, that you would have eternal life. Trust God that Jesus was the Saviour and confess Him as your Lord, repent of your sins and obey God. That is, trust and obey. It is really simple. So simple, says Jesus, that a child can do it **(Matthew 18:3)**.

b. How You Live Matters

But know this. There is something Solomon wants to remind you of before he ends his book, and it is that you will die ... and you will stand before God ... and He will judge you, as his last sentence is:

“For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil”
(Eccl 12:14).

The purpose of such a statement is not necessarily scare tactics, though it is a fearful thing to contemplate standing before God as your judge (**Hebrews 10:31**). Solomon is merely cautioning us to realize that what we do and how we live matters. He is emphasizing the severity of not applying his counsel to live for God in light of the transitory nature of life. For without Christ there is no meaning in life. Without Christ there is no purpose in life. Without Christ we only have destruction and hell to look forward. But with Christ, and through Christ, and in Christ there is meaning and purpose in life. As Paul says:

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (**Eph 1:7-10**).

Thus the message of Ecclesiastes to us today is to quit looking for meaning in all the wrong places. You will not find the meaning of life your bank balance or your favourite sports team. You will not find the ultimate purpose in life in a pursuit of education or by climbing the corporate ladder. Devote your life to what matters. Commit to living a life with purpose. Don't waste your life, instead embrace a life with meaning. There is only one place to find meaning in life and that place is a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. Trust in Him, worship Him, live for Him, for in Jesus we find the meaning of life. For that reason I will conclude this message with the memorable words of C.T. Studd, a missionary from just under a century ago: "Only one life, 'twill soon be past, Only what's done for Christ will last." Christ is the meaning of life.