

The End of Meaninglessness

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[0 : 00] Bible open or have your service sheet in front of you so you can see these words from Ecclesiastes. This is the last sermon, the last talk in Ecclesiastes and I'm sad that it's come to an end because it's one of my favourite books in the Bible but in the book you're always teaching or preaching on it happens to be the most important book that you think at the time.

But it's been a great book for us and the title for this series has been Searching for Meaning because we discover the teacher of Ecclesiastes is searching for meaning and purpose and satisfaction and joy and happiness in life.

And so that is a very contemporary search today, isn't it? People are looking for meaning and purpose and joy and satisfaction, looking in many different places. And so as we come to the end of the book of Ecclesiastes we find the answer to the search for meaning.

And so it's helpful for us. So let me pray and then we'll ask for God's help as we study this passage together. Father God, we do pray that you would open up our minds and you would help us to hear your voice.

Speak to us so that we don't just hear what you say but so that we then go and put into practice what you teach us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[1 : 19] Okay, you've probably heard of Samuel Beckett, the Irish playwright. And he's known for exploring the darker side of human experience in his plays.

Waiting for Godot is one of his most famous plays. But Beckett has another play called Breath and it's less than a minute long. And it features just the sound of breathing.

And the UK premiere was actually in Glasgow in 1969. So breath doesn't include any actors. There is no speech. There is no drama.

Only stage directions. And so here's Beckett's full script for the play. Curtain, number one. Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish.

Hold for about five seconds. Number two. Faint brief cry and immediately inspiration and slow increase of light together reaching maximum together in about ten seconds.

[2 : 19] Silence and hold for about five seconds. Number three. Expiration and slow decrease of light together reaching minimum together. Light as in I in about ten seconds and immediately cry as before.

Silence and hold for about five seconds. Now all of that put together is basically a mere 35 seconds of a play trying to dramatically portray human life as a breath.

I mean I'd be pretty disappointed if I went to the theater. I only got 35 seconds for my money. But that's Beckett's play. It's meant to be stark and it's meant to say that life is brief.

And it's a profoundly bleak and depressing play. But at the same time it's a perspective on life that we find here from the book of Ecclesiastes. Remember the teacher's first words.

Ecclesiastes chapter 1 verse 2. He said meaningless, meaningless. Utterly meaningless.

Everything is meaningless. And then we see from today's reading in chapter 12 at the end that these are some of his last words as well.

[3 : 31] So verse 8. Meaningless. Meaningless says the teacher. Everything is meaningless. Now the word for meaningless in Ecclesiastes is from the Hebrew word hebel.

And it has the sense of breath or vapor. And it's like a mist that comes and then goes. Or like a puff of smoke.

And so our existence is a mere breath disappearing as quickly as it comes. That's what he's saying. And this word hebel, meaningless as it's translated, occurs 38 times right through the book of Ecclesiastes.

From the beginning right through to the end. And so now we're at the end of Ecclesiastes. We haven't just come full circle from meaningless to meaningless. But we've come to the end of meaninglessness.

Because what we find here is the conclusion, the epilogue, where he wraps up everything he's been saying. And he gives us the answer. He gives us the solution to the seeming meaninglessness of life.

[4 : 32] The brevity of life. The fleeting nature of life in this world. And so the teacher himself, who narrates most of the book of Ecclesiastes, he has taken us by the hand, as it were, on his search through life.

And he's forced us to stare at the reality of life in this world in order to prove to us that life makes no sense without God. And so, like many people today, he has searched for meaning in everything that this material world offers.

So he's tried pleasure. He has tried work. He has tried success. He has tried wealth. But he's discovered that nothing satisfies. And he's also woken us up to the reality of death.

In a brutally honest way. In order that we might make the most of the life that God has given to us.

And so his aim has been to prove that if there is no God, then life has no meaning.

And nothing matters. But the epilogue reveals the answer. Because what he is saying is that there is a God. Therefore, life does have meaning.

[5 : 45] So, everything does matter. And so whether you call yourself a Christian today or not, and you're here and you're listening, what we've got here is the answer to the search for meaning in life in a nutshell.

That's what we've got in these closing verses. And so first we see that we need to hear the words of life. Verse 9 to 12. And second, we need to fear the God of life.

And so those are our two points. Hear the words of life. And then second, fear the God of life. So first of all, hear the words of life. Verse 9 to 12. Here we're told about the purpose and the power of the teacher's words.

So verse 9. Not only was the teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. So this is an insight into the teacher and what he's been doing all along with all his words.

So the teacher was wise, but he didn't keep his wisdom to himself. He imparted his wisdom so that others might become wise. And that's why he speaks with such brutal honesty.

[6 : 52] Because he's not just passing on thrifty answers or platitudes. What he's doing is getting down to the nitty gritty, the confusion and the complexity of life in this world with all its futility, all its despair and death.

And he doesn't want us to be deluded into thinking that somehow we can control all of this. Or we can completely understand our lives in this world. He wants us to stop looking under the sun, as it were, and to look beyond the sun and to see that there is a God.

Because he has made life and he's made the universe, then he invests our lives with meaning and purpose and significance. And yet despite his wisdom and his desire to impart knowledge, the teacher is no ivory tower scholar.

He didn't have his head stuck in his books all the time. You wouldn't always just find him sitting in the library. Of course he'd be in the library, he'd be in the laboratory.

But he did his research in the university of life. And so what we've got in Ecclesiastes is really a copy of his personal journal. A lot of people journal these days.

[8 : 06] Well, this is his journal. He had pondered everything. He had tackled every big question. He'd looked at the complexity of life. And he captured it in his work, in his parables, and in his proverbs.

And so his wisdom is more than just knowledge, just head knowledge. His wisdom is real lived life experience in this world of suffering and pain and confusion.

And so verse 10, we read, A better translation would be to say that he searched to find words of delight.

Words of delight. So because they were words of delight, then they were upright and they were true. And what he says is presented in such a beautiful way so that we are better able to take it in. So his words aren't just for instructing our minds. His words are for delighting our hearts. Because when God's words come to us and they delight our hearts, then they do affect change in our lives.

[9 : 17] And so when it comes to communicating the words of life, both truth and beauty matter. I used to think truth is all that matters.

Tell the truth. It doesn't matter how you say it, as long as you say it, get it out there, that's it. But, of course the truth matters and we should tell the truth.

And yet so often I find we give little time to finding just the right words. Words that delight. Words that present the truth in a palatable way so that people can take it on and take it in.

And so the teacher of Ecclesiastes is the perfect example of us because his powerful use of poetry and of metaphor drive home the truth of God, not just into our minds, but in a way that touches our hearts so that it then changes our lives.

And so the words of life will bring us delight and joy. They'll make us smile and live a wise and beautiful life.

[10 : 21] Well, there's more because the words of life don't just bring pleasure. They also bring pain. Look at verse 11. The words of the wise are like goads.

They're collected sayings like firmly embedded nails given by one shepherd. So Ecclesiastes isn't meant to be an easy read. The words of the teacher are like goads.

Now what's a goad? Well, a goad is a sharply pointed stick, often with an iron tip. And farmers would use these sticks to drive their animals down the road.

So if the animal didn't go on the right path, if it went off to the right or the left, the farmer would then painfully prod his animal with his goad so that his animal moves in the right direction.

And so Ecclesiastes is, in a sense, God prodding us, showing us some pain, letting us feel it so that we live our lives in the right way.

[11 : 20] It's sometimes said that truth hurts. It's even sung by some people, truth hurts. And so Ecclesiastes is meant to cause us some pain. It's meant to make us uncomfortable.

And if you've been with us throughout this season, you will have felt God prodding you into action. Because these words that come from the teacher have shocked us.

They have irritated us sometimes. But they've made us sit up and take notice. And the reason is because they're meant to drive us to God, away from ourselves, our thinking, our wisdom and knowledge and towards God.

And so we have felt the wounds as those who know God. But if you don't know God, or you aren't even sure that God and you've been here, then what you've read and what you've heard has probably annoyed you, even angered you.

Because the message of Ecclesiastes is that your life makes no sense without God. That's a painful thing for anyone to hear. It's painful to hear that you might think you're in control of your life, but you aren't.

[12 : 34] And it's painful to hear you might think you completely understand how things work in this world, but you don't. And you might think that you can search and hunt and seek satisfaction in all sorts of things in life, wealth, success, power, sex.

But all these things will fail to deliver and fail to satisfy. And so the message of Ecclesiastes is a message that gets underneath our skin because it shatters all our self-sufficiency and all our attempts to play as if we were God in this world.

And that's why the teacher's words here are just embedded nails. Because when these words are driven into our minds and into our hearts, they will strengthen our lives.

Because when you hammer a nail into a block of wood, the nail is fixed and the nail stays. It isn't moving. And so when the words of life are firmly fixed in us, in our minds and in our hearts and our consciousness, then they will direct our lives.

We'll be able to hang our whole life experience, as it were, on these words of life. Why? Because these words will interpret our lives for us.

[13 : 51] And they'll interpret the world for us. And they'll help us understand why things are the way they are. But what's the source of these words? Well, they can only come from one place.

The teacher says that they are given one shepherd. In verse 11. So the one shepherd is none other than God himself. And it's the only time the title shepherd appears in Ecclesiastes.

But when we read the rest of the Old Testament, shepherd is a title that's often given to God. And so we said it ourselves at the start of the service in Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd.

So God speaks as our shepherd to direct our lives. Because we desperately need to hear his words to us. And his words are intellectually credible.

And they're existentially satisfying. At the same time. Well, what does that mean? Intellectually credible. It means they make best sense in our minds. They explain how the world is.

[14 : 53] How our lives are better than anything else. And they're existentially satisfying. In that these words give us the best resources. For how to live our lives in this world.

And yet our problem as human beings is that we don't like to listen to God's words. And we don't like to follow God's words. Because we think we know better ourselves. And this is what happened to our first parents, Adam and Eve.

Way back in Genesis. The beginning of the world. The creation. Where God had instructed them about what to do. But they decided to reject God's words.

And go their own way. Way. And that's why the rest of the story of the Bible. And the story of human history. The story of humanity. Is the story of the one God.

The shepherd. Who is showing us the path. Back to himself. And directing us in his ways. So that we might walk in them. And the path is Jesus Christ.

[15 : 54] He is the way. The truth. And the life. And so the end of Ecclesiastes is so important for us. Because it helps us understand the whole Bible.

Because Ecclesiastes is the very word of God. Given by God. Given to us. So that we hear it and obey it. And that's why we need to listen to the voice of God.

Above every other voice that we hear in society today. And why we must live by God's words above all other words.

That try to direct our lives. And our culture today. And there are plenty words today aren't there? And that's surely why we're given this warning. In verse 12. Be warned my son of anything in addition to them.

Of making many books there is no end. And much study wearies the body. Isn't that a great verse? If you're a pupil at school or a student at university.

[16 : 52] Next time your teacher gives you some homework to do. Or gives you a stack of books to read. You just quote them. Ecclesiastes chapter 12 verse 12. Of making many books there is no end.

And much study wearies the body. Well the point is. There is a lot of words out there. But they're not all helpful. And they aren't all useful.

In fact the whole load of words out there. Are just rubbish. Of the making of many books there is no end. And so whether the books are in print. Or whether they're digital.

There is no end to the rubbish that is constantly churned out today. So just because a book is sold on Amazon. Doesn't mean it's worth anything. Any fool can publish something online today.

I've met so many people who've told me about their self-published book. Which now retails on Amazon. And suggests that they buy it. It's been hard enough trying to talk to them in person.

[17 : 52] Let alone why would I go and buy and spend money on their book. And so what the teacher is saying is true isn't it. We need to be warned of anything that comes to us.

Giving advice. Giving guidance. Trying to direct our lives that doesn't come from God and his words. Because human wisdom is just that. It is human wisdom.

And human philosophy is just human philosophy. Which means it will never be able to direct our lives. In the way that the author of life can direct our lives.

And so it is good to seek truth. And it is good to search for meaning in life. And perhaps that describes you. You would say you're on a search. And you're looking for meaning and purpose.

And that's why you're listening today. But you don't need to seek truth. Or search for truth any further. Than the word of God. In the Bible. So listen to his voice.

[18 : 53] He knows what is best. Don't let God's voice be drowned out. By all the other voices that you will hear. In our world today. Because what we've got here.

Are the creator's instructions. My son Matthew. For his birthday. Got some Star Wars Lego. And the Lego instruction book. Was the thickest Lego instruction book.

I have ever seen. So thick. And yet so necessary. Because without it. There would never be. A functioning at-at walker. And never any chance.

To reenact the battle of Hoth. And so. If we want to make best sense. Of life. And how to live it. Then. We desperately need to follow.

The maker's instructions. We need to listen to our creator. We need to listen to our creator. Because he gives us words. Of life. Words. For life. Words that make sense.

[19 : 49] Of everything. And so that's the first point. Second point. Is that we. Don't just need to hear the words of life. But we need to fear. The God of life. Verse 13 to 14. So this is the take home message of Ecclesiastes.

So the teacher is searched for meaning. In humanity. In education. In pleasure. In history. In success. In work. In wealth.

And in wisdom. And after his extensive search. Of all the things he's tried. And all the stones he has overturned. We read. Verse 13. Now all has been heard.

Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God. And keep his commandments. For this is the duty. Of all mankind. For God will bring every deed. Into judgment. Including every hidden thing. Whether it is good. Or evil. Remember. Ecclesiastes has shown us. That life is. The nearest of rest. And so we won't find meaning.

[20 : 50] If we ignore the God who made us. Life will only make sense. When we recognize. That God is our creator. And we are merely creatures.

And so the only way. To discover. The end of meaninglessness. Is knowing. The God who made us. And knowing. How to relate to him.

And that's what we're told to do. Isn't it? Fear God. And keep his commandments. For this. Is the duty of all mankind. So that is why. We exist. That is the meaning of life.

That sums up for us. What it means. To be truly human. My whole duty. As a human being. Is to fear God.

And to keep his commandments. Well so what does it mean. To fear God. Well to fear God. Is to revere him. To honor him. To worship him. To stand in awe.

[21 : 48] Of him. To recognize who he is. And to realize. Who I am. Before him. Because only as we grasp. Who he is.

And who we are. Will we fear him. And want. To keep his commandments. And yet this isn't how we tend. To think. Or even live.

Is it? We just don't see that. This is why. We exist. This is the purpose. Of every human being. But we're told. This is our. Whole duty.

In life. Our duty. And so it should impact. Everything. We do. And it should impact. Every relationship. That we have. But we're not learning.

Anything radical here. From Ecclesiastes. Because this fits. With the rest. Of the wisdom literature. In the Bible. And so the writer of Proverbs. Says the same thing. In Proverbs. Chapter 1.

[22 : 41] Verse 7. He says. The fear of the Lord. Is the beginning of knowledge. But fools despise. Wisdom. And instruction. So fearing the Lord. And keeping his commandments.

Is what life. Is all about. And there's no other way. To be wise. Than this. And it's only. When we understand this.

That life will make sense. In this fallen. And broken world. The fear of God. The fear of God. Will steady us. Through those seasons in life. That we can't control. And can't understand.

And it will humble us. As mere creatures. Before. The almighty God. And keeping God's commandments. Will comfort us. When we learn. That as our creator God.

He knows best. How I should flourish. As a human being. In this world. And so it's wise. To listen to him. Because God's commandments. Aren't meant to spoil our lives.

[23 : 40] But so the poor. And so why. Is it our duty. To keep them. Well the teacher tells us. In verse 14. For God will bring. Every deed. Into judgment.

So the fact. That there. Is a judgment. And it's on the horizon. It's coming. It tells us. That life. Isn't. Meaningless. Because that fixed point.

In the future. Helps us. To make sense. Of everything. Right now. Because if there is no God. Then there can be no judgment. And therefore. There is no answer.

To all the evil. And all the injustice. In our world. But. The teacher is telling us. The author of Ecclesiastes. But since there is a God. Then he will bring.

Every deed. Into judgment. Including everything hidden. Whether it is good. Or evil. And so that means. There is a solution. To all the world's problems. And it's the judgment. Of God.

[24 : 36] Because we can be sure. That God. In his justice. Will put. Everything right. In the end. And that's a good thing. And so Ecclesiastes.

Enables us to see. Above the sun. To see a God. Who is in control. Of the sun. And the universe.

And who will. Put everything right. And sort everything out. In the end. And so we're being told.
Don't try. And search for meaning. Without God.
Because you'll never find it. Instead. Seek God. When you're trying to make sense of life. And then
everything else. Will fall. Into place.
When you know him. Because there is a creator God. He has spoken to us. And he does command
us. How to live. And he will judge us. One day. And that's why the book of Ecclesiastes.
[25 : 32] Is meant to propel us forwards. Towards that judgment. Telling us to remember our
creator. In this life. Remember chapter 12 verse 1. Remember him now.
Because you will meet your creator. Then. On that day. When he judges. And so it's never brave.
To stand up in opposition to God. Or to reject God.
It's plain stupid. Because God holds my destiny. In his hands. And that's why it matters. How I use
my time.
How I live my life. What I do with the talents. And the treasures. God has blessed me with.
Everything matters.
Because it's all. Played out. Before the watching God. Who will give his final verdict. On every
single one. Of our lives. And so the problem is.
[26 : 31] None of us have made it. Our whole duty. To fear God. And to keep his commandments.
And so. Because we've never done that. Our whole lives. 100% of the time.
And we deserve to be judged. For the way that we treated God. And how we failed to obey him.
And the Bible calls this. Sin. And God in his justice.
Must punish. Sin. And so. He must punish us. And that's why Ecclesiastes. Points us towards.
Jesus Christ. As our only hope.
In life. The good news of Christianity. Is that Jesus came. To save us. By taking on the punishment.
That we deserve. Jesus entered into.
This fallen world. He came. With all its frustration. With all its futility. With all its despair. And with
death. Jesus came to be. A man.
[27 : 26] In this world. And Jesus perfectly. Kept all. God's commandments. Jesus has done. The
duty. Of all.
Mankind. And he did it. For us. He lived a life. That we could never live. A life. In full obedience. To
God. And he died the death.
That we deserve. To die. A death. For our failure. To treat. Our creator. God. As God. Our failure.
To behave. As creatures.
Who know. A right place. And so. On the cross. Jesus. Suffered. And died. In our place. So we can
be forgiven. And accepted. By God.
And then he rose. From the grave. And conquered. Sin. And death. And so the finished work. Of
Jesus Christ. Assures us. That judgment.
[28 : 19] Doesn't mean. We need to go to hell. Because when. That day comes. All who believe. In
Jesus Christ. Won't just be standing. Before their judge.
They will be looking. Into the eyes. Of their loving. Saviour. And so there is no need. To fear. Death.
Or judgment. They are coming.
But with Jesus Christ. They open up the way. To a new. And everlasting life. And to a perfectly.
Restored. Creation. The world. We all. Long for.
And it's this sure. And certain hope. That enables us. To live wisely. And well. In this world. At this
time. Jesus.
Is the end. Of meaninglessness. For our lives. And for our world. And so if you're still. Searching.
For meaning. In life.
[29 : 16] Then search. No further. Than Jesus Christ. Let's pray. We thank you. Our creator. God.
For how you have. Spoken to us. You're revealed. To us. How we should live. In this world. We
thank you. That your words. Make sense. They direct.
And guide. Our lives. And they point us. To your son. Jesus Christ. Who is the. Saviour. We need.
To take away. The sin.
That separates us. From you. And to restore. That broken relationship. And we thank you. That
through the death. And resurrection. Of Jesus Christ. We have that certain hope. That you don't
just.

Renew. Our broken lives. But one day. After the judgment. You will restore. This broken world.
That's in Jesus name. Amen.
[30 : 10] Thanks for listening. I'm... Jose... Seems to be.