

What's the point of life?

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[0 : 0 0] What's the point of life? Have you ever found yourself asking that question? Has life ever seemed meaningless? There may be no more fundamental question in life than what is the meaning of life?

Now today we begin our new series on the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. And Ecclesiastes is a fascinating book because it explores the search for meaning in life.

And so as we consider this I'd like to mention a fascinating observation made by a man called Viktor Frankl. Frankl wrote one of the most powerful books to emerge from the Holocaust called Man's Search for Meaning.

Viktor Frankl was himself a Holocaust survivor and a professor of psychiatry. And so he tells of his horrifying experiences as a prisoner in Nazi death camps including Auschwitz.

But he also writes about what he observed in the other prisoners as they faced suffering. He discovered that it was those who were without hope who died most quickly in the camps.

[1 : 0 4] Whereas those who found meaning even in the face of their suffering were better able to survive. In other words those who had something to live for, those who could see beyond the circumstances of this life, coped far better.

So Frankl wrote, striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man. He explains that what can help one to survive even the worst conditions is the knowledge that there is meaning to one's life.

Frankl's point is simple. You need to have meaning in your life. Now of course our culture would agree that it's important to have meaning and purpose.

But it would say you should try and create your own meaning for your own life. But what Ecclesiastes shows us is that it's futile trying to create meaning for ourselves.

And so through a brutally honest exploration of life and death, the author forces us to face up to the fact that we will struggle to find meaning in life without God.

[2 : 1 3] And so whether we call ourselves a Christian or not, Ecclesiastes exposes us to the reality that life is meaningless if we ignore the God who made us.

And so to introduce the book today, we're going to think about three things. First of all, the crisis of meaning. Second, the search for meaning. And third, the discovery of meaning.

The crisis of meaning, the search for meaning, and the discovery of meaning. First, the crisis of meaning. This is in chapter 1, verse 1 to 3. Straight away, the author of Ecclesiastes highlights the crisis of meaning we have as human beings.

Listen to the opening words, Ecclesiastes chapter 1. The words of the teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem. Meaningless, meaningless, says the teacher.

Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. Now those are weird words to read in the Bible, aren't they? And so we need to consider who is saying this and why is he saying it?

- [3 : 20] Well, the author calls himself the teacher. This translates the Hebrew word Koheleth, which means assembler. And so we might call him a number of things, such as the professor, the philosopher, or the pundit.
- Because his approach is to assemble together his musings on life and to help us make sense of it. And so he gives us an introduction, chapter 1, verse 1 to 11.
- And then a conclusion, chapter 12, verse 8 to 14. And in these sections, the teacher is referred to in the third person. But then in the main body of the book, right in the middle, he speaks in the first person, giving us a personal account of his search for meaning.
- Because like many people today, he tried to find meaning in everything this material world offers, such as pleasure, work, success, wealth.
- And yet he ends up dissatisfied and empty. Now it may be that the teacher was Solomon because a lot of what he says echoes Solomon's life.
- [4 : 23] But whether he's to be identified as Solomon or associated with Solomon, it makes sense simply to refer to him as the teacher. Because that's what he calls himself. So why does he begin by teaching meaningless, meaningless, utterly meaningless, everything is meaningless?
- Now the word meaningless is translated from the Hebrew word hevel. And it's got the sense of breath or vapour. And so it pictures life as fleeting, like a mist that comes and goes, or like a puff of smoke.
- And so our existence, he's saying, is a mere breath, disappearing as quickly as it comes. But these aren't just the teacher's first words in his book.
- They're also some of his last. In fact, 38 times throughout Ecclesiastes, he describes life as a mere breath, as meaningless. And so Ecclesiastes is his meditation or his thought experiment on the search for meaning when our lives are like a mere breath.
- And so he begins his exploration with a question in verse 3. This question is crucial because what follows is his attempt to answer it.
- [5 : 49] He's asking, what's all our striving for as human beings? What does it profit us to work as hard as we can our entire lives? At the end of the day, what do we actually gain by slaving our guts out?
- And the answer implied is absolutely nothing. So then, what's the point of life? He's really painting a bleak picture for us.
- Essentially, he's saying, life is hard work and then you die. It's so brutal, isn't it? And yet we know it's so true. And so he uses a phrase to give us a clue as to where he's going with all of this.
- He sums up the reality of life on this earth with the words, under the sun. This little phrase, under the sun, appears 29 times in the book.
- It runs right the way through. Perhaps a bit like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. You know, da-da-da-dam, under the sun. It runs through because the teacher wants us to understand what he's saying.
- [6 : 52] That life, under the sun, meaning life in all its different dimensions, doesn't add up without God. And so the teacher is embarking upon a study of life and he wants us to do the same.
- But it's clear that this teacher didn't have his head stuck in the books the whole time. His search for meaning goes beyond the library, the lecture theatre and the laboratory.
- Of course, you'd find him there, but he's a student of the University of Life. And so you'll also find him hanging out wherever people are, whether that be the Royal Concert Hall or the boardroom or the homeless shelter.

And so if you're trying to make sense of life yourself, then you're in good company with the teacher. Because his discoveries are just as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago.

And so he wants us to join his search for meaning to discover where true meaning is to be found. And so that's our first point, the crisis of meaning.

[7 : 57] Our second point is the search for meaning. And we see this in chapter 1, verse 4 to 11. The teacher wants to explore everything in his search for meaning.

And so he reflects on the world around him, on creation and history to try to make sense of human life. And that's the point of verse 4 to 11.

He describes poetically the beauty of creation and the rhythm of history to emphasise the meaningless nature of life. Life goes round and round.

It comes and goes just like creation and history. It's really just the same old, same old when you think about it. Listen to how this plays out in relation to creation.

Verse 4. Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. So people come and people go, while creation stays the same.

[8 : 53] And so we might think our lives are significant or we're making an impact on this earth. And yet the imprint of our lives is quickly washed away, just like footprints on the beach when the tide comes in.

And so for all our toil and sweat and tears that we invest in our lives work, there's nothing to show for it. Our lives are transient. We are born, we live, we die.

There's an inherent monotony to human existence. That's the teacher's depressing start. But then he continues to go downhill because he's saying that even creation is on repeat.

Listen to what he says. The sun rises and the sun sets. It hurries back to where it rises. The sun just goes up and down and round and round.

And then there's the wind. It's even more unpredictable. He says the wind blows to the south and turns to the north. Round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.

[9 : 56] That's why we can't trust the weather forecast. And then there's the water. He says all streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.

Now, of course, we've got the scientific answers to explain how the world works. Primary school children know the water cycle and how the streams run into the sea.

But the teacher's point is not about the how questions. He's more concerned about the why questions. And so the creation endlessly repeats its patterns.

Or human life comes and goes. And to him, it's wearisome. Listen. All things are wearisome. More than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing. Nor the ear, it's full of hearing. And so the repetitive nature of creation and human life leave us dissatisfied.

[10 : 56] That's why our eyes never tire of seeing new things. There's always more to see on YouTube or Netflix or Instagram or Facebook. And our ears are never filled with all that we can hear.

There's always more to listen to on Spotify and Amazon Music. And so we fill our lives with all sorts of things to break the monotony and make our existence just that bit more bearable.

But we're never satisfied. I can remember when the first generation Apple iPod came out. I had a friend who bought one the day it was released. But then after he bought the iPod, he needed the skin or the case.

And then some transmitter thing to turn it into a radio. And then he got some mini speakers. And then he needed more battery power for all his extras. And then he needed a special carry case for all the kit.

And guess what happened then? Apple brought out the new, smaller, sleeker iPod Nano. So he ended up buying that too. And then so began a brand new iPod accessory collection.

[12 : 03] Now that's just a trivial example. But there is an insatiable thirst for more in life. Our appetites are never satisfied. But it's not only the repetitive nature of creation and human life that leave us dissatisfied.

History is no better. Listen to what the teacher says. What has been will be again. What has been done will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun.

Is there anything of which one can say, Look, this is something new. It was here already long ago. It was here before our time.

So there is nothing new under the sun. Malcolm Muggeridge, the journalist, said, All new news is old news happening to new people.

So history just repeats itself from the sublime to the ridiculous. Human nature is the same. Events in history are the same.

[13 : 06] They just happen in different times to different people. There are always wars. There are always tragedies. How often has the word unprecedented been used about the coronavirus?

Yet pandemics, plagues and epidemics have always ravaged human history. Whether it's the Black Death or the Spanish Flu or the Swine Flu or Ebola.

And all the news stories, they're basically the same, only with different names. Essentially, there is nothing new. Just think about fashion. Our parents or grandparents have been there, done that, bought the t-shirt or the skinny jeans or the puff sleeves or whatever.

When we moved house a couple of years ago, my wife, Shona, was all for throwing out a pair of my nice shoes. They were loafers and I hadn't worn them for years and they must have been about 15 years old at the time.

And she said, you're not keeping those, are you? Nobody wears shoes like that anymore. I said, just wait. In a couple of years' time, they will be all the rage.

[14 : 15] And guess what? Loafers have made a comeback this year. That's just how much of a dedicated follower of fashion I am. But do you get the teacher's point?

History just repeats itself. It's all been said or seen or done or tried before. And that is life under the sun.

So listen to the teacher's final words in his introduction. Verse 11. No one remembers the former generations or even those yet to come. Will not be remembered by those who follow them.

It's not nice to think that our lives are so insignificant, is it? We like to imagine that we make some grand contribution to the world. But we don't.

No matter what we achieve. We may make the newspaper when we're born or again when we die. But we're ignored for the time in between. And less, of course, we make it big time or we mess up big time.

[15 : 16] And so when we die, we are soon forgotten about. It sounds harsh, but it's true. Just take your great-grandparents as an example.

Do you even know their names? Do you know what they did or what they achieved? And even if you do, you can't go much further back, can you?

Isaac Watts sums it up well in his hymn, O God, Our Help in Ages Past. He says, Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away.

They fly forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day. It is a thoroughly depressing state of affairs. But it's accurate.

It's reality. Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher, said, Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance.

[16 : 16] And Bertrand Russell, the British atheist philosopher, said this, The only platform upon which intelligent man can take his stand is upon a philosophy of unyielding despair.

Now, these great minds have looked at the world around them and have similarly found no meaning and no purpose and no point to life.

And they're not saying anything new because the teacher of Ecclesiastes has been there before them. But while they reached their sceptical and secular conclusion, the teacher of Ecclesiastes has yet to reach his.

And so what he's doing is he is pushing us to show us that life under the sun, life without God, is utterly meaningless. And so if our existence is like a mere breath that comes and goes, then there is no meaning.

But if there is a God who makes us for eternity, then that's a game changer. And so we can't search for meaning in life without God.

[17 : 27] And so those are our first two points, the crisis of meaning and the search for meaning. Now, thirdly, the discovery of meaning. In our search for meaning, we will never discover meaning without God.

But the teacher makes no mention of God in his introduction. Did you notice? And it's deliberate because the bulk of the book experiments with the idea of what life is like under the sun with no reference to God.

And so the teacher explores everything humans try to find meaning in order to show how it all ultimately fails. And we'll see this as we follow him on his journey.

But if we're going to make sense of what's said in this enigmatic book, we need to hear the conclusion. Because seeing the light at the end of the tunnel will help us navigate our way through.

And so I'd like to turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 12 to verse 9 to 14. Ecclesiastes 12 verse 9.

[18 : 32] Not only was the teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The teacher searched to find just the right words and what he wrote was upright and true.

And so these are the words of a wise man, not a fool. And he is searched to find just the right words to give us a true perspective on life. So we read, And so Ecclesiastes isn't meant to be an easy read.

The teacher wants to give us a reality check by driving home the hard truth, which isn't always comfortable to hear. But we need to hear his words because they're 100% correct.

Under the sun, life is hard and then you die. And that's why we can't just view life from an under the sun perspective. And so in the closing words, our horizons are expanded to show us life from an above the sun perspective as well.

So listen to these final two verses from Ecclesiastes chapter 12. 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.

[20 : 06] For God will bring every deed into judgment, including everything hidden, whether it is good or evil. Now the meaning of life comes into fuller view when we see it in relation to God.

Because amidst all the uncertainty of life, accompanied by the reality of death, there is certain judgment to come. And so it's that fixed point in the future that helps us make sense of everything right now.

Because if we will all stand before God, our creator and our judge, to give an account of our lives, then it impacts how we live them and what we're living for.

And so the teacher experiments with life and all it offers to prove that if we leave God out, none of it makes any sense. Now, this doesn't mean that if we believe in God, all our problems will disappear or that life will never be painful or perplexing.

But it does mean that we will only discover true meaning with God. And so as we search for meaning, it can and will only ever be found in God.

[21 : 19] We began with Viktor Frankl's book, Man's Search for Meaning. Frankl discovered that the prisoners who quote best in death camps found meaning beyond their terrible circumstances to some transcendent reference point.

In other words, they found meaning beyond this life under the sun because of their religious belief. And so can you see the bottom line of Ecclesiastes?

It acknowledges the crisis of meaning that is common to all humanity. It explores our search for meaning as human beings. And it forces us to admit the futility of trying to create meaning in this material world.

And it enables us to see beyond this life and even this world to discover meaning in relation to the God who made us. We're being told, don't search for meaning under the sun because you'll never find it.

Instead, seek God when you're trying to make sense of life and everything else will fall into place. And so we will only discover meaning in life if we fear God by relating to him as we should.

[22 : 30] And if we keep his commandments by obeying him as we should and by living in light of the future judgment. It's only in relationship with God that our lives make any sense.

But the tragedy is that we have cut ourselves off from a direct relationship with our loving creator God. And the Bible calls this sin.

And it's because of our sin that this life often seems so meaningless. Later in the Bible, there's an echo of the teacher's words when the Apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 8 that the creation was subjected to frustration.

The word frustration is the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word for meaningless that we find in Ecclesiastes. And so the creation is groaning in frustration because of sin.

And our lives often seem meaningless because of sin. But the good news is that Jesus Christ willingly suffered the curse for sin when he died on the cross.

[23 : 39] So that one day the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay. And so when we read Ecclesiastes, in the light of Jesus Christ, we discover that true meaning is found in him.

Jesus came to live, to die and to rise again to restore our broken relationship with God. And to undo the meaninglessness and frustration of life under the sun.

Only through Jesus can we enjoy a relationship with God that gives meaning to life now and certain hope beyond death.

Christianity assures us that because of God's judgment, everything will be put right in the end. And this makes best sense of our world and our lives.

And so if you're searching for meaning, search no further than Jesus Christ. Let's pray. We thank you, God, for the gift of life you have given to us.

[24 : 45] So when life doesn't seem to make sense to us, please remind us of the meaning we discover in the gift of your son, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray.

Amen. Amen.