

Finding Meaning in a Meaningless World

Ecclesiastes Overview

(preached Pine Grove 7/12/15; Sunday PM)

Introduction

I want to introduce our overview of the book of Ecclesiastes in a rather unusual way...

By playing a short video clip of someone famous.

I think I have mentioned this video clip in another sermon, but it is really a great introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes...

What you are going to see in this video is a professional football player named Tom Brady.

Many would consider him to be one of the greatest football players to ever play the game...

Now, this interview with Tom, -which only lasts a few minutes, was filmed in 2005.

At the time of the interview, Tom Brady had already won 3 Super Bowls....

He had just received a football contract worth \$60 million....

In other words, he was on top of the world...

And little has changed for him even today...

He is still playing football; he won Super Bowl #4 last year and he is even richer...

He is now married to a super model, and now has 3 children..

In a lot of ways, he is more on top of the world now...

But I go back to this interview in 2005 because I really admire Tom's honesty in it...

And I think he says something in this interview that most everyone has thought at some time in their life but never said it...

Now, Tom Brady was not a believer in 2005 to my knowledge, and I don't think anything has changed today, but what he says here is so interesting...

So, let's watch this clip as a lead in to looking at the book of Ecclesiastes tonight....

PLAY VIDEO.

That's really interesting isn't it?

A man with millions at the top of his career, and yet something inside him tells him that there has got to be something more to life...

I remember very clearly a time in my life where I had a very similar thought...

It was in 1994, and I had driven from Clemson down to Columbia to spend some time with friends who were going to South Carolina.

They had a Thursday night football game against Kentucky, and they asked me to come down and go...

I went and cheered for Kentucky because I simply wanted to come down and party with my friends....

But I remember waking up the next morning.

We had slept all night on those foam egg crate mattresses....

And when I woke up, I was face to face with my buddy...

I mean when I opened my eyes, he was right there in my face, mouth open and snoring....

And I remember very clearly to this day of thinking to myself, "There has got to be more to life than this."

Now, I was just the opposite of Tom Brady.

I was broke with no girlfriend and no job, but at that moment in that dorm room at the University of South Carolina, I knew life had to be more than this.

Now, the Lord didn't save me in that moment....

But I think He was beginning to awaken my heart to the reality that a life of partying was not the purpose of my existence.

That is why I love Tom Brady's honesty there.

He is saying what a lot of people think after they have achieved something great....

Ok, this goal was supposed to make me feel so full but now that I have accomplished it, why do I feel so empty?

I have worked for years to get this promotion or have this much money or build this house or own this car...

But now that I have these things, I still don't feel like I thought I would...

With that said, listen to how John MacArthur describes the book of Ecclesiastes...

“This book demonstrates that a person who sees each day of existence, labor, and basic provision as a gift from God, and accepts whatever God gives will actually lead an abundant life. However,

anyone who seeks to be satisfied apart from God will live with emptiness regardless of personal successes.”

And that is really the message of the book of Ecclesiastes...

Without a true relationship with God, nothing in this world has meaning or purpose.

But when you have a true relationship to God, even the most unimportant things in life can be enjoyed.

That is the message of Ecclesiastes.

Though there is much debate on the author of this book, Solomon seems to be best choice.

In fact, I feel certain that Israel's 3rd king was the author.

Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom section of the OT, and Solomon was the wisest of all.

Solomon was also a son of David, and a king in Jerusalem, and the 1st verse identifies the author of Ecclesiastes as a son of David and a king in Jerusalem.

Now, Solomon's life was not the life that you would think would be true of the wisest man who ever lived.

Though Solomon possessed wisdom, he did not always make the wisest decisions.

According to 1 Kings 11, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

These foreign women turned Solomon's heart away from God even in his later years of life...

However, most believe that Ecclesiastes was written at the very end of Solomon's life after he had experienced all that life had to offer..

All the wives, all the money, all the pleasures that were available to Solomon as the wisest and richest man ever did not fulfill Solomon...

They only made him feel more empty than ever....

And then led him to write the book of Ecclesiastes as a way to pass on what he learned about life to the next generation and even to us tonight...

The simple saying that we all use is money can't buy happiness, but Solomon is going to add that neither can wisdom or a relationship or a good job or power or achievement or fame...

None of these things bring happiness and fulfillment if you are not in a right relationship with the LORD.

That is the message of Ecclesiastes, so let's take a quick look at how Solomon makes the case to seek true fulfillment in the LORD...

There are a number of ways to divide up this book, but I have simply chosen the most popular way....

We are going to look at...

I. The Problem that Life Seems Meaningless (1:1-1:11)

The will spend a few chapters looking at Solomon offering...

II. The Proof that Life Seems Meaningless (1:12-6:12)

And after looking at problem of life being empty and the proof that shows that life is empty....

We will close by looking at....

III. The Prescription for a Life that's Not Meaningless (7-12)...

So, let's begin in chapter 1....

By looking at....

I. The Problem that Life Seems Meaningless (1:1-1:11)

1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2 “^[a]Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher,

“^[b]Vanity of vanities! All is ^[c]vanity.”

3 What advantage does man have in all his work Which he does under the sun?

Couple things to take note of here....

The author is described as the Preacher.

The name Ecclesiastes comes from the original word which means “assembly.”

The idea of Ecclesiastes is that the preacher/teacher/speaker is standing up before a crowd offering wisdom to them.

So, the preacher gets up, and we see like I said before that he is the son of David, and a king in Jerusalem..

And he says this vanity, vanity vanity...

Which is a word that is very important in the book of Ecclesiastes..

Vanity can mean a few different things in the book depending upon the context of where it is used...

It can mean something that is worthless or without value...

It can mean something that is difficult to understand...

It can mean something that you reach for but it slips out of your grasp before you can grab hold of it...

And then there is another phrase in verse 2 that we are going to see a lot of...

And that is “under the sun.”

And that is simply a reference to anything that happens on this earth...

It is Solomon’s way of describing activities that happen in this world..

And what is the point of this opening?

Solomon is saying that everything is meaningless, and in verse 2, he first points to the meaninglessness of work...

To which everyone of us responds with a loud AMEN!

And the reason that everything is vanity is because the earth keeps turning after your death...

Solomon is saying that all he does really has no effect upon the world...

People say that they desire to leave a mark upon this world, but Solomon has realized that leaving a mark on the world is impossible...

The world keeps rotating, the rivers keep flowing, time keeps passing, and that really means that whatever he does is meaningless in the end...

Let me give you an example of this that I was just thinking about a few weeks ago at the beach....

I spent time digging and moving sand and building a nice sand castle....

All the kids in our family played around it....

But guess what?

The tide came in, the waters covered up the castle in a matter of minutes...

And guess what?

In less than an hour, you couldn't even tell that I had dug a hole or that I had piled up sand in that spot...

The power of the tide flattened it all back like what it was before I started, and it didn't even look like a sand castle was there..

And that is the reality of everything that we do here on earth according to Solomon....

The earth keeps turning, the waters keep flowing and eventually all is forgotten

And that was the problem that Solomon is presenting to everyone in these opening 11 verses of Ecclesiastes....

Everything is vanity, and to the man without God, that is the reality of his existence...

Then Solomon moves into a number of different topics in chapters 2-6 that he sees as worthless as well...

So, let's take a look at his proof that everything in the world is meaningless....

II. The Proof that Life Seems Meaningless (1:12-6:12)

One of the first things that Solomon says is worthless is work...

Proof #1 – Work is Meaningless

Look at Ecc. 2:18-23.....

¹⁸ Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have ^[u]control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. ²⁰ Therefore I ^[o]completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. ²¹ When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his ^[p]legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. ²² For what does a man get in all his labor and in ^[q]his striving with which he labors under the sun? ²³ Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his ^[r]mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

Solomon sees that he can work real hard, yet he may pass on the fruit of his work to lazy man...

His hard work may be squandered by the next generation...

All of those possibilities leave Solomon frustrated with his hands in the air...

And here is a good point to remember as you read Ecclesiastes...

There is truth in all these things that Solomon is going to say are vanity...

But there is also a balance that needs to be remembered as well...

Though work may be worthless in a sense; work is also used by God as a means of blessing to a man as well...

Work provides a way of life for you and your family..

Work can be enjoyable at times...

Work can help build the Lord's kingdom.

But the truth about all of these good qualities of work is that a man can only see when he has a right relationship with the Lord.

And when we see these complaints in these opening chapters about the vanity of these things, we must

understand this is the perspective of a man looking at these things apart from the LORD.

Let me give you an illustration....

A man can work at a job for 20 years as an unsaved man...

And all he can see is the dread and burden of work every day.....

But then that man gets saved, and though the work is still the same....

He has a joy in going to work so that he share the gospel with his co-workers...

And he has an opportunity to now live out his changed life before the world...

The truth is that the job hasn't changed, but the man doing the job has changed...

And so his perspective on work has also changed...

This is similar to what we see here in these 6 chapters of Ecclesiastes...

We get a worldly perspective on all these worthless activities, and when all are viewed through an unsaved man's eyes, there is no value in any of them.

This is true about work, and #2, it is also true about our lives.

#2 – Life is Meaningless

19 For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts ^[h]is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is ^[i]vanity.²⁰ All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. Solomon even sees the vanity of life...

People die. Animals die.

In Solomon's mind, there seems to be no point in even living.

If everything eventually dies, what's the big deal in even being born in the first place...

Obviously, that is man's perspective on life apart from God and there is even truth in that...

And I would even argue that everyone has thought at times in life...

What's the point of all of this?

However, only the one who truly knows God sees the value in life on the earth...

Only he or she can see that the meaning of life is to know and glorify God in all we do...

Solomon then mentions the vanity of something else in chapter 4....

#3 - Money is meaningless

Look at Ecc 5:10...

¹⁰ He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is ^[u]vanity.

Though money is a part of life, it is not a source of true satisfaction in this life...

The problem with money is that you always want more than you have...

And money always want to occupy the seat that the Lord deserves in your life...

So, money is vanity...

Now, there are other vanities that I haven't covered, but the point of this second section is to offer proof that life is vanity....

Solomon's offer of proof ends at the end of chapter 6, and so chapter 7 takes a little turn...

Because Solomon begins to offer....

III. The Prescription for a Life that's Not Meaningless (7-12)...

Rather than simply throwing his hands up and saying, “what’s the point of all of this and simply giving up.....”

Solomon offers some things that he has learned from his search from satisfaction....

In chapter 7 and part of chapter 8, Solomon has learned that it is not wise to try and determine all that God is doing in this world...

Sometimes the wicked prosper and sometimes the righteous suffer, and since man’s wisdom is limited, it is useless to try and figure all of this out...

Look at Ecc 8:16...

¹⁶ When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should ^[m]never sleep day or night), ¹⁷ and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, “I know,” he cannot discover.

So, the first prescription for finding a meaningful life is to realize that you will never understand it all...

Deuteronomy 29:29 says this...

²⁹ ***“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.***

In other words, realize very quickly that you can't know it all...

You every met someone who had to know every last detail on a situation...

They literally cannot sleep until they have all the details...

It gets to the point where they can't even function or enjoy life for wanting to know more..

Solomon's advice is to know that you can't know it all...

It is fine to seek out more knowledge and wisdom, but settle in your mind that you will never have all the answers...

In chapters 9-11, Solomon offers some random thoughts on finding a meaningful life...

Since man cannot know how many days he has upon the earth....

Solomon offers a couple thoughts....

Let's look at Ecc 9:7-10...

⁷ Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. ⁸ Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. ⁹ Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your ^[d]fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun^[e]; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.

This is where a lot of people run into problems with the book of Ecclesiastes and try to make it say something that it doesn't.

Solomon is not advocating a sinful lifestyle because God would not inspire him to write this book to encourage a sinful lifestyle...

There are other passages in the book that sound similar to this where Solomon says eat, drink and be merry....

Yet none of these passages are an encouragement to sin or live a lifestyle of sin...

Rather, Solomon is saying that the earth is full of joy as long as we realize that the blessings of this life are from God's hand...

And if God allows you enough wealth to take a vacation, take that vacation, see it as a blessing of God and enjoy your break from work...

If you are able to go and eat a big steak, enjoy the steak, thank God for it from your heart and eat it for the glory of God...

The point is not to indulge yourself in sin.

Rather the point is to live a life going about your business but seeing everything in your life, -whether good or bad,- as coming from the hand of God.

If God sends a trial, endure that trial, learn from it, strengthen your faith through it, and praise God for it..

If God gives you little, enjoy the little things in life, and thank God for it...

IF God sends a blessing, enjoy the fruit of that blessing and thank God for it...

So, Solomon is saying here to enjoy the bread and wine that may come into your life...

Enjoy the nice clothes, enjoy a good smelling oil on your head, enjoy your spouse...

In other words, if God sends earthly rewards, enjoy them guilt free, praise God for them and see them as a great blessing...

Solomon continues this idea in chapter 11....

Look at verse 9....

⁹ Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the ^[g]impulses of your heart and the ^[h]desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things.

There is the great balance in life...

Enjoy the pleasures of this world but don't sin...

That is great advice to young people for sure...

Even in a fallen world, people can find enjoyable things to do...

And Solomon has concluded that those things are good, but as you do them, do them with the knowledge that judgment awaits if you sin...

And then he adds this to his advice in 12:1...

12 Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth,

This stands contrary to the old saying that a young person has all the time in the world...

But Solomon's advice from what he has learned is to get to work early serving the Lord..

I don't really ever think about things that I could have done different..

But if I could ask the Lord to change thing about my life....

IT would be for Him to save me sooner...

I think about all the wasted time I spent as a teenager that I could have spent learning more about the Lord...

Obviously, God's plan is perfect, but I do wish that I had thought more about God in my youth like Solomon says here...

And then there's one final conclusion that Solomon reaches....

And this is really the advice that stands above all the advice that he has given so far...

If the richest man and the wisent man of all time...

If the man who had truly experienced all that life had to offer...

The money, the fame, the power....

IF that man could speak to you today and give you one piece of advice, it would be found in Solomon's words in 12:13-14....

¹³ The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. ¹⁴ For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

The ultimate prescription for finding a meaningful life from the man who literally had it all...

IS to fear and obey the Lord...

That is the sum of it all....

Have a fear of God because HE is the one to whom you will answer...

And then keep His commands...

Two things to say about that....

First of all you can't keep the commands....

That is why you need Christ, who did keep the commands of the LORD...

But second, heart obedience also leads to a blessed life..

God's commands serve two purposes in your life...

They are designed to provide for you and they are designed to protect....

It is not that God is a dictator who wants you to obey because he wants to rule over you and feel better about himself....

No, the point of obedience is that it leads to a blessed life...

God wants you to obey so that you live a life free from the horrible consequences of sin...

And Solomon finally discovers that at the end of his life unfortunately..

You, on the other hand, can find blessing now wherever you are in life...

If you simply begin obeying the commands of the LORD found in the Scriptures...

Conclusion

Where does Ecclesiastes fit in the Bible?

It is another piece of God's wisdom to us that says the value of this life depends on how you the Creator and if you are in a right relationship with Him...

It also says that a man or woman cannot understand it all....

So instead of looking for something that is beyond your reach, simply enjoy the things that are within your reach....

And see them as gifts from a loving God...

And it closes with the best wisdom available to any person on the planet...

Fear God and keep His commandments..

You know every time I see Tom Brady in this interview.....

I can't help but pray for him...

I so admire his courage to speak his heart there....

And I would also say this...

You come into contact with Tome BRadys in your life....

People who simply don't understand this world...

People who have thrown their hands up and complain about the unfairness of this world....

Our challenge is to tell them that they are right....

The world is meaningless at times...

But then we need to point them to the One who can give meaning to their life....

Because He has given meaning to our life...

Amen?

Let's pray.