

The Meaning of Life

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on August 26, 2018

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

1 The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 2 Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. 3 What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? 4 A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. 5 The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises. 6 The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. 7 All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. 8 All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. 9 What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. 10 Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has already been, in the ages before us. 11 The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them.

This morning we begin a ten part series on the book of Ecclesiastes. This book, which is found in the middle of your Bible belongs to the portion of Scripture known as "wisdom literature." In the ancient near East, this genre of writing was characterized by sayings of wisdom intended to teach about divinity and about virtue while offering insight and wisdom about nature and reality. In the Bible, the Book of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs comprise the books known as "wisdom literature."

Turning to the subject of our sermon series, Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon, the son of David, who was the king of Israel. Of all the things that made Solomon famous, it was his wisdom that brought him the greatest renown.

As illustrations of this wisdom, you may recall from your Sunday School days, how he used a sword and some clever logic to identify the real mother of a kidnaped baby. You may remember how the Queen of Sheba came from a far away land to hear Solomon speak. Perhaps the best story of Solomon's wisdom comes from 1 Kings 3, shortly after he claimed the throne of Israel. At that time Solomon went to the altar of Gibeon to worship and pray and then God appeared to him in a dream and told him He would give him anything he wanted.

In response to God's offer, Solomon, in great humility, asked for the wisdom to judge God's people justly. This request pleased God and God granted Solomon his wish and gave him wisdom above all others.

From this wisdom that God granted to Solomon he was inspired to write three books that

would be part of the Holy Scriptures. In the book of Ecclesiastes, which is one of those three books, and the subject of our new sermon series, Solomon addressed the timeless question, “what is the meaning of life?”

As he wrestled with this subject over the course of twelve chapters, Solomon reflected back on his long life. In verse two of today’s reading he opens with some shocking words. “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” In the NIV it reads, “‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’”

Now, what are we to make of these words? As we ponder this question, it will be helpful to recall that during King Solomon’s lifetime, he was the richest and most famous man in the world. People came from near and far to hear him speak. Each year he would receive one billion dollars in gold, not to mention silver, other precious metals and stones, horses, chariots, and all manner of wealth. The Song of Songs says Solomon was the best looking of ten thousand.

Furthermore, Solomon’s life was marked by peace. Unlike his father, David, who fought in many battles, Solomon, during his forty year reign, never experienced war, or even faced the threat of war. Thus, during Solomon’s reign, the nation of Israel prospered unlike any other time in its history. During Solomon’s reign, the borders of Israel were at its zenith.

On the dark side of things, Solomon, had seven hundred wives, and three hundred concubines. Many of these wives came from marriages to foreign women betrothed to Solomon as part of peace alliances. These alliances, while politically expedient, were contrary to God’s laws. The Bible tells us that it was through these marriages that the worship of foreign gods were introduced into the land of Israel and took root.

As a result of these foreign women occupying his home, and his bed, over the course of his lifetime, the righteous and wise King Solomon drifted away from God. And because Solomon drifted, the nation drifted, and God responded. Immediately following Solomon’s reign, there was a civil war that was initiated by the Lord as an act of judgement. The kingdom of Israel divided and it was never re-united again.

Reflecting on all these facts, it is my opinion, that Solomon had a divided heart at the end of his life. In my opinion, this is the reason why it often seems that throughout the book of Ecclesiastes that Solomon is of a double mind. In my opinion, it seems that on the one hand, as he writes, he remembers the faith and the zeal that he had for the Lord during his youth and this light still frames his perspective.

On the other hand, it is quite clear that his heart has been influenced by his fame, his wealth,

his unparalleled abilities and accomplishments and his intimate relationships. All one needs to do is look at Solomon's actions, or to listen to his words, and it is evident that he has changed. In many ways these changes have not been for the better.

As I think of his transformation, I am reminded of several stories I once heard from an executive from a record company who had worked with many household name recording stars. Many of these performers he had known before they were famous and then after they became famous. As he recounted the stories, he observed that it is almost impossible for a human being to remain grounded when they are treated like a god, everywhere they go, year in and year out. Add to that the obscene amounts of money, and the constant travel that divorces them from any kind of normal human relationship and the nicest of people become insufferable monsters.

It is likely for this reason that King Agur writes in Proverbs thirty, "give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God."

Another thought. When thinking about life, there are two ways we can approach things. We can begin with God and the revelation we have received through the Bible that describes God's nature and God's plans for creation and use this foundation to construct our understanding of the world and our experiences in it. Or we can build our understanding of how the world works starting with ourselves and our experiences of life.

Throughout most of Ecclesiastes, Solomon appears to be in the latter frame of reference. And starting with himself, and his experiences of life as his foundation for evaluating the world it leads him to a very dark place. Like the nihilistic philosophers of the modern era, Solomon reflects on his long, healthy, and privileged life and concludes in verse two of today's reading that it is all meaningless!

Then, in verse three, Solomon asks, "What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" In verse eight he writes, "All things are wearisome, more than one can say." In verse eleven he says, "The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them."

How depressing! Notice the lack of gratitude in these words. Which is most striking because here is a man who has everything and who has been given the extreme privilege of being the leader of God's chosen people and who will play a big role in God's redemptive plans for the world. And yet, in chapter one of Ecclesiastes, Solomon writes as if there is no hope, there is no future, there is no meaning.

This is what happens when we drift away from God. Ever so slowly a darkness comes over our heart, and rather than being filled with thankfulness for all the goodness we receive from God's hand, rather than being filled with hope for the future knowing that God is with us and is using us to accomplish His good purposes, rather than experiencing a life that is full of meaning, as we drift from God and as we build our understanding of the world based solely on our personal experiences of life, a dark and fatalistic spirit begins to grow within us and it will bring destruction to us and the world in which we live.

In Solomon's case this slow creeping darkness eventually led to the splintering of the nation of Israel. In today's world, many of the most brutal acts of violence that we hear about are committed by people who rail about the futility of life and are consumed by the darkness that frame of reference produces.

Thus, for me, Ecclesiastes serves as a warning. This is what happens when our hearts start to drift from the Lord. We lose our sense of gratitude. We lose our sense of meaning. We start to become bitter. And it consumes us and the people around us, and it brings everybody down.

It is a dangerous place to be and it can happen to anyone. If Solomon, a man highly favoured by God, who was the wisest man of his day can be drawn into this dangerous way of thinking, so can we. We need to be alert.

But there is hope. For it is often when we are at the end of our rope when we find God. So even if we are like Solomon, and we feel like life is meaningless, that it is all for nothing, that what we do just doesn't matter, we are not beyond God's reach. In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon starts out in a dark place, but, he does not finish there.

By the grace of God, after Solomon gives us a very thorough and insightful explanation of the typical human hearts' quest to find meaning in life on their own terms, he concludes Ecclesiastes by properly establishing the God centered order of the world that is necessary to make sense of life.

And by God's grace, may He reach into our hearts, wherever they may be and lead us to a place of God centered hope. Even as our hearts are battered by the suffering of life, which fills us with fear, and anxiety; may God remind us that He is with us, that He is good, and that His mercy endures forever. No matter what darkness we may be facing in this moment, may the light of Christ cast out all fear and lead us to a place of profound thankfulness for all that God has done for us and for the deeply meaningful life of love that Christ provides to all who place their trust in him.