

6/6/14

Searching for meaning – the jaded life

***And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*** Rom 8:28

**Readings:**

Ecclesiastes 1.1-18

Ecclesiastes 2.1-11

**In my youth I never struggled with the meaning of life – it seemed fairly obvious to me.**

Because I was a Christian from my childhood, I grew up with a world view, an understanding of reality that gave a clear meaning to life.

*God had created us for an eternal relationship.*

There was meaning in life because meaning was given by a purposeful creator who gave life meaning.

There have been a few bumps and blips along the way, some that really tested me, but the meaning of life still seems pretty obvious to me.

**You may not find my view on this very satisfying.**

Either yourself or someone near to you may be searching for a satisfying answer to the meaning of life, but it seems elusive.

**There are many ways that people search for meaning in life:**

**Soul searching**, inward looking. Meditation, pondering, reflection.

**Travel** – some go to exotic places, try to look at the world through the eyes of other cultures.

**Alternate lifestyles** – looking at a simpler way of living, getting in touch with something more primitive and primal, perhaps seeking isolation and leaving modern conveniences behind.

**Study** – learn philosophy, seek to understand the perspective of great thinkers and philosophers. To read widely and think deeply.

**Mind altering substances** – some take drugs to try and free the mind or at least open it to an alternative way of seeing things.

**You may know of people who have tried one or two of these things as they sought to understand the deeper meaning of life.**

Or perhaps you can look back and remember how you searched for meaning in life.

A few might think this is just a namby pamby self indulgent quest and in my day you just got on with life.

**People come to a variety of conclusions about life's meaning:**

There is no meaning – so don't waste your time looking.

There is meaning, but it can't be known, it is beyond us.

There is meaning, but I haven't found it – still searching/open

There is meaning, God has revealed it through the scripture

**If there is no meaning then there is nothing more to life than mere existence.**

No intrinsic value to life, nothing that lies behind it or before it, it just is.

With no meaning or purpose if life became extinct it wouldn't make any difference in the grand scheme of things, because there is no grand scheme of things.

Given that there are millions of lifeless planets orbiting sun's another one would be neither here nor there.

If the lights went out on earth there would be no one for hundreds or thousands of light years to notice or to care.

**There is meaning but it can't be found or known** – that would be hugely frustrating.

**There is meaning, but it just hasn't been discovered yet,** that would also be frustrating, yet there would be some hope that one day it would be understood and life would make sense.

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**The book of Ecclesiastes explores the meaning of life and sheds light on the search to uncover answers about life's meaning.**

**Context –**

**This is a complex book set in ancient times.**

It sees human life as complex and it doesn't simply give pat answers to difficult questions.

There are a lot of complex permutations to life, Wise/foolish, righteous/evil, young/old, rich/poor, many shades in between and different mixtures of all.

The complexity of this means there are no easy answers and as you read this book you see the different approaches the teacher takes to explore and find the answers.

**The writer doesn't have our picture of life.**

**He doesn't have the benefit of our knowledge of the world or the human mind.** He doesn't understand science as we do. He hasn't read all the great philosophers that we have access to.

He isn't aware of modern psychology or psychiatry as we are.

**He doesn't have the spiritual insight of the New Testament.** He doesn't understand God's plan for salvation, the teaching of Jesus, the cross or the empty tomb.

**This writer, from his point in history can't see, God has more to reveal with the passing of time and particularly in the person of Jesus.**

Therefore there are aspects of this book that a modern Christian won't find fully satisfying.

We know there is more, but the writer doesn't have this insight.

**Some of his statements or conclusions don't sound very Christian.**

He says *there is a time to kill, a time for war and a time to hate*

*Man's fate is like that of the animals; ... As one dies, so dies the other, ... man has no advantage over the animal. Ecc 3:19*

**We may also feel uneasy with the process used by the writer.**

Some of his experiments involve the use of vast sums of money on megalomaniac scale building projects.

He also takes things to excess with drinking and finds sexual and sensual pleasures in a harem.

**All of these things mean that reading this book can be difficult** and it doesn't give us easy answers. However, it is also full of gems and I encourage you to read through and become familiar with it.

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***Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.*** Ecc 1:2

It sounds like the teacher was having a bad day, perhaps even a bad year. This sounds dreadfully pessimistic. You might say that the teacher was a *glass half empty* sort of person.

The teacher seems a bit jaded and weary of life.

This is not a very upbeat and catchy start to the book. We might as well stop here and close the book!

The Good news version isn't any better, *It is useless, useless. Life is useless, all useless.*

Net Bible says, *Futile! Futile!" laments the Teacher, "Absolutely futile! Everything is futile!* Ecc 1:2

The KJV stresses life is all in vain saying, *Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.*

This is not the sort of cheerful passage that might lift your spirits and give you encouragement for the day ahead.

**Yet this is very human, you might have had times when you more or less said the very same thing.**

The bible is very honest about our human experience. You can almost imagine the teacher banging his head against the wall as he said this, Life is meaningless, useless, futile.

**The variety of words used here give us a clue that the original Hebrew word the Teacher uses is hard to pin down and translate.**

In other places in the Old Testament it is translated *breath* or *breeze*. The idea being that something is fleeting, passing, a vapour that is hard to catch or something that is momentary. The writer joins these ideas in 1.14 saying all that happens on earth, ... *all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind*. Rather than saying meaningless the Message Bible tries to express it saying, *Smoke, nothing but smoke. There's nothing to anything—it's all smoke.*

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**The key question that gives a framework to this book is in verse 3**

*What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun?*  
This will be asked directly or indirectly in a number of ways throughout the book.

What is the benefit and the outcome of life?

What gain is there in living?

Is there anything lasting and substantial or is it just smoke and chasing the wind?

Are you any better off if you focus on something good like wisdom than you are if you simply indulge yourself in pleasure?

Is there any benefit in being wise or doesn't it matter if you play the fool?

**The sense of futility, being jaded is underlined in verses 4-11 in which the teacher sees his life as going around in endless circles.**

This is the sense that is picked up in the Pete Seeger song whose lyrics quote directly from chapter 3 King James Version. He added about six words of his own saying, *To everything, turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn and a time for every purpose under heaven.*

To the writer of Ecc, life seemed to be on a repeating loop, turn, turn turn:

the sun rises, the sun sets, then repeats the same tomorrow  
the wind blows from the South, turns to the North and then round and round it goes.

Water flows from a stream into the sea, but it doesn't overflow, it just returns to the place streams flow from and begins again.

He is weary with this routine and his frustration is vented saying, *What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.*

There is a frustrating sameness about it all, nothing changes. Is this all there is to life?

**The teacher sees everything as meaningless**, is there nothing to gain from it all, it all goes around in never ending circles.

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**Against this back drop the teacher embarks on a great experiment to discover meaning in life.**

### ***Can meaning be found in the quest for Knowledge and Wisdom? 1.12***

Worthy quest – society prizes education, in places from pre-school through to university.

Ancient's prized knowledge set up places of learning such as the great library at Alexandria. The aim was to collect all the world's knowledge in one place.

It was the ancient equivalent of our modern internet.

As you read Ecc you find that the teacher devoted time to reading and understanding. He says there was none other like him in his own day.

He was a wise person who gave education his best shot; no one could have done better. Yet he concludes it is like chasing after the wind.

At the end of his study he concludes, *Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.* Ecc 12:12

Overall wisdom and knowledge are good things, much better than foolishness, but they don't give a satisfactory answer to the meaning of life.

**The second big experiment looks at whether meaning can be found through the pursuit of pleasure. 2.1-11**

I imagine a number of people will be thinking, *I don't know if this will work, but I am willing to give it a try.*

The teacher threw himself into exploring pleasure in a number of ways:

**Laughter** – amusement and fun. Living on the lighter side of life.

**Drinking wine** – he sat back enjoyed a few drinks, just an experiment you understand.

**Building a dream home** – a big house with gardens, vineyards and orchard. Great views, modern conveniences, and plenty of land.

**Growing a business empire and amassing vast wealth** – he built up herds and flocks; and accumulated gold, silver and precious treasures.

**Entertainment** – he arranged concerts with male and female singers.

**Sexual pleasures** – he built up a harem and indulged himself

Just to make sure we understand that he tried it all, he tells us in 2.10

***I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labour.***

I suppose we might see this today as the playboy dream, every pleasure indulged.

Yet real satisfaction and meaning was not to be found in these pursuits, again he judges it to be meaningless.

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**At this point you can see the teacher is becoming jaded, tired and weary. Frustration is creeping in.**

All this is compounded by the realisation that even if you work hard and gain a fortune, you are going to die and the person who inherits it may squander all your hard earnings.

You may have scrimped and saved, taking care with every penny, but the heir might just spend it on a car, a boat or an overseas trip – she/he might decide to enjoy the money and spend up large.

The heir may be wise or foolish in how they spend your fortune.

**What is the point of life, what is its meaning** when the sun and wind just turn, turn, turn, when neither great wisdom or great pleasure hold the answer and when all your hard work and even the memory of you is lost when you die?

### **The initial conclusion brings an initial insight**

Rather than pursuing meaning in wisdom or pleasure, a person ... *can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?* Ecc 2:24

Gain, satisfaction and meaning can be found in the simple things of life that are available to all.

You don't need great intelligence or to study the heights and depths of wisdom. You don't need great wealth to pursue housing projects or landscaping. You don't need to go to the extremes of a hedonistic life in pursuit of pleasure. None of these things can provide you with meaning.

History is full of people who pursued these things yet remained unhappy and unfulfilled.

### **The initial conclusion is that meaning and satisfaction are a gift from God as we enjoy the simple pleasures in life.**

Without God even the greatest wisdom, the highest pleasure or the greatest achievement are like chasing the wind.

With God even the simple pleasures of bring meaning to our lives.



**This is just the beginning of the quest for meaning. The teacher has other things to consider and to bring to our attention, read on ...**

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**You – What difference does this make to you?**

Each of us is probably in a different place in our thinking regarding the meaning of life:

**You may** have it settled in your mind from a Christian perspective that God gives meaning and we find it in the bible. For you the challenge may be to think of how that meaning applies to your day to day life, not just meaning on a grand scale, but meaning in what you do today.

**Some might** still be searching for that meaning and wondering what life is all about, if anything.

You might ask, *Is there something to be gained by living?*

*Is there any real substance to it?*

*Does it matter that I walked the face of the earth?*

*At the end of my life will I have made a difference, will my life have had meaning?*

These are important questions for individuals and the human race. I encourage you to grapple with them.

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**If there is no meaning to life, life is the poorer for it.**

If there is no meaning to life, it impacts the value we place on life. It has an effect on how we see abortion, euthanasia, war and human suffering.

If life has no underlying meaning then why save a life? Why help if there is a flood, a famine or an earthquake?

**But if there is meaning it gives value to life.**

This will also impact on how we see moral questions and how we value each human life.

**But more than this, if there is meaning, we must ask who gives it meaning;**

and this points us to something beyond ourselves, to God, to the creator who gives purpose to life.

**We, as a church, believe there is meaning to life.**

We give expression to this in our church mission and vision, *to help people know and follow Jesus.*

We understand that Jesus has given us purpose for this life and for eternity.

If there is no meaning in life, then equally there is no meaning for the church or any other group of people.

The meaning we find as a church, gives purpose and direction to our daily lives. We can eat and drink and enjoy our work, because we see these things as gifts from God.

Life for us is not a monotonous repetition, but a life that has direction.

Our life is not a frustrating chasing of the wind, to gain wisdom, indulge in endless pleasure or to hoard wealth. Rather we live to enjoy each moment knowing that our lives not only have meaning, but we are part of God's plan for this earth and for the world to come.

**Therefore let us as a church**

live in the light of God's purposes,  
seeking to fulfil his plan

and enjoying the simple daily pleasures of eating, drinking and working.

**Let us live with meaning and share that meaning with others**

for life is meaningful, not meaningless;

useful not useless;

worthwhile not futile

and of eternal substance not a passing vapour.