

Bible Survey - Ecclesiastes

by Peter Hammond

The sermon explores Solomon's reflections in Ecclesiastes on the futility of life without God and the search for true meaning and purpose.

Topics: "Eternal Purpose", "Fear Of God"

Description

Peter Hammond preaches on Solomon's search for meaning and purpose in life as documented in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon, the richest and most powerful king, pursued every pleasure and philosophy, only to find it all meaningless and futile. Despite exploring secular humanism, existentialism, and hedonism, Solomon concludes that true meaning and purpose can only be found in fearing God and keeping His commandments. The preacher emphasizes the importance of living in the light of eternity, seeking God's Kingdom first, and remembering our Creator in our youth.

Transcript

Solomon's Search for Meaning and Purpose in Life

King Solomon, the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, was the richest and most powerful king in the world at his time. Solomon was famous for his wisdom, riches and literary achievements. Solomon had the power to do anything he wanted and he had the wealth to indulge every whim.

Asking the Right Questions

It is incredible to think that this Book was written almost 3,000 years ago. It seems so very up-to-date in this secular humanist, existential and hedonist society. Solomon's philosophical search for meaning and purpose in life resonates through the ages. He asks the fundamental questions: Is life more than the things we see, do and possess? What is the meaning of life?

Futility and Frustration

"'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher; 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' What profit has a man from all his labour in which he toils under the sun? One generation passes away, and another generation comes; But the earth abides forever. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; the wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit. All the rivers run into the sea, Yet the sea is not full; to the place from which the rivers come, there they return again. All things are full of labour; man cannot express it. The eye is not

satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. ■Ecclesiastes 1:2-9

Understanding the Times

Solomon accurately describes the attitude of cynical indifference and hopeless pessimism which, in so many ways, characterises our age. Fatalism: Whatever will be, will be. Existentialism: Live for the moment. Hedonism: Live for pleasure. Pessimism: Things are bound to get worse. Cynicism: Even good things are not what they seem. Materialism: Life consists in the things we accumulate. He testifies: "And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under Heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind... 'I have attained greatness, and have gained more wisdom than all who were before me in Jerusalem. My heart has understood great wisdom and knowledge.' And I set my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is grasping for the wind. For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." Ecclesiastes 1:13-18

The Ruinous Road of the Rat Race

Solomon goes down one dead-end-street after another. He pursues pleasure, entertainment, alcohol, parties, great projects, commerce, science, agriculture, architecture, arts, culture, materialism, wealth, treasure, money, possessions, wine, women and song.

Our Soul is Too Big for This World to Fill

"I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure'; but surely, this also was vanity. I said of laughter - 'Madness!'; and of mirth, 'What does it accomplish?' I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under Heaven all the days of their lives. I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds. So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labour; and this was my reward from all my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labour in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun." Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

The Limits of Human Wisdom

The Book of Ecclesiastes documents the utter futility of secular philosophies. Solomon lists the absurdities, mysteries, disappointments and disillusionments of a life spent outside of God. Life separated from God is meaningless. Everything done this side of Eternity is meaningless, if one separates it from the source of all meaning and purpose: Our Creator. Seeking meaning and purpose in life through philosophic speculation "under the sun" will only lead to frustration. The term "under the sun" occurs 28 times in

Ecclesiastes, and nowhere else in the Bible. If we limit our worldview to this earth and fail to consider everything from God's perspective, then we will be frustrated with emptiness and meaninglessness. Revelation is essential if we are to understand and fulfil our purpose on earth.

Contrasting Ecclesiastes with Psalms

The Book of Ecclesiastes is so very different from the Book of Psalms. Solomon's father, King David, was forever shouting: Rejoice, sing praises to God, magnify His Name, Glory in His splendours. The Psalms of David are full of blessings and joy. However, the refrain of King Solomon in the Book of Ecclesiastes is: "Vanity!" The word vanity (futility, or meaninglessness), occurs 37 times in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Chasing the Wind

Those who attempt to find meaning and purpose in hedonism, wine, women and song, or in drugs, music and sex, through materialism, fame and fortune, through philosophy, degrees and psychology, in pragmatism and workaholicism, through the treadmill of achievements, or through an existential journey of self-discovery, 'finding themselves' in self-actualisation, will also ultimately be crying "Meaningless! Meaningless!" All achievements and experiences are for but a season.

The Inevitability of Death

Solomon notes that: "Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. Yet I myself perceived that the same event happens to them all. So I said in my heart, 'As it happens to the fool, it also happens to me, and why was I then more wise?' Then I said in my heart, 'This also is vanity' For there is no more remembrance of the wise than of the fool forever, since all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come. And how does a wise man die? As the fool!" Ecclesiastes 2:13-16

When Fools Inherit What Others Have Worked For

Solomon reports: "Then I hated all my labour in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labour in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity." Ecclesiastes 2:18-19

A Time for Every Purpose

Solomon writes: "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under Heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to gain, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace... He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts..." Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

The Tragedy of the Transient

Time and again Solomon returns to the theme of Eternity. He had great wisdom and unparalleled opportunity to observe and to explore every avenue of earthly life. After much research and experiment, Solomon concluded that, on the whole, humanity found little joy and fulfillment in this life. He yearned for something beyond himself, and beyond this world. Everything passes away, everything in this life fails to completely satisfy. He grieved over the prevalent wickedness and cruelties of men. He despaired of any meaning and purpose if death ends life, and if there is nothing beyond this present world. If this world is all there is, if there is no Day of Judgement, no eternity, no God who will make all things right, then life is aimless, purposeless, meaningless, and futile!

Wisdom Accepts Warnings

There are great gems of wisdom in the Book of Ecclesiastes: "Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more." Ecclesiastes 4:13

A Funeral is Better Than a Party

"Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart." Ecclesiastes 7:2

The Song of Fools

"It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise than for a man to hear the song of fools." Ecclesiastes 7:5

The Curse of Crime

Why does crime increase? Solomon concludes: "Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." Ecclesiastes 8:11

Madness in Their Hearts

"This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead." Ecclesiastes 9:3

Trapped By Evil Times

"...The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong... For man also does not know his time: Like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them." Ecclesiastes 9:11-12

Make the Most of Every Opportunity

Solomon also warns us not to be unduly deterred from seizing the moment by adverse circumstances. "He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything. In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, either this or that, or whether both alike will be good." Ecclesiastes 11:4-6

Seize the Moment

Solomon urges a strong work ethic. Do not procrastinate. Seize the moment. "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might..." Ecclesiastes 9:10. Life is long enough to live out God's purposes, but it's too short to waste a moment.

The Futility of the Finite

After racing down every dead-end-street, pursuing all the pleasures and philosophies of life, Solomon, the richest, most powerful and wisest king of his day, pronounces that it is all meaningless. "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity." Solomon has looked back, he has looked within, he has looked around, and he has looked out for meaning and purpose "under Heaven". Then he finally looks up.

Focus on God and His Word

After all the philosophical cul-de-sacs, Solomon concludes that meaning and purpose can only be found in God alone. "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil." Ecclesiastes 12:13-14. Our responsibilities are far more important than our rights. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Fear God Alone

Ecclesiastes reaches the same conclusion as the Book of Proverbs: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." Proverbs 3:5-6. Our Lord Jesus warned us not to fear those who can only kill the body. Fear God who can destroy both body and soul in hell, forever!

Applying the Lordship of Christ to All Areas of Life

Conviction affects character through conduct. Conduct divorced from conviction is destructive. Conduct guided by conviction is constructive. The Bible tells us how we should live and why: For the glory of God, in the light of eternity, in accordance with the Word of God.

The same conclusion is found in the New Testament: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." John 17:3

Live in the Light of Eternity

God has set eternity in the hearts of men. In the light of Eternity, knowing that the Day of Judgment will come, when we will have to stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, we must fear God and keep His Commandments. "But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." Matthew 6:33

"Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth..." Ecclesiastes 12:1

"You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore." Psalm 16:11

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