

Sermon: Living All of Life Unto God (Ecclesiastes 1-2)¹

Lee Tankersley

Does your life have any real purpose and meaning? Can you find any real satisfaction in life? These are the questions that everyone in every part of the world asks at some point. No doubt these questions have haunted our minds as well. Yet they are questions that, as believers, we may be afraid to ask. Maybe we are fearful of asking such questions because we “know” we should not think of them.

LEE TANKERSLEY received his Ph.D. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Tankersley is Pastor of Cornerstone Community Church in Jackson, Tennessee.

The man who works 40-50 hours a week at a seemingly inconsequential job wonders if there is purpose. The wife who—over and over each day—changes diapers, does dishes, and keeps her house clean is

tempted to ask these questions. Yet we may never ask them out loud because we feel they should not be asked. Then our silence leads us to wonder if we are the only ones thinking about these things.

There is good news. The Bible asks these questions. Specifically, Ecclesiastes asks and answers the question, “Is there any meaning and purpose in our lives in the midst of a world that (1) will go on without us once we are gone and (2) is filled with so much injustice?” Therefore, if you’ve been afraid to ask this question, then fear no more; God

has asked it for you through the pen of Solomon.

The thought Ecclesiastes asks the question we all ask may make us excited about studying such a book. However excited we may be, once we begin to look at it ourselves, we soon find that it is a very difficult book to understand. We might wonder if Ecclesiastes is anything more than a tirade by the most pessimistic and cynical man who has ever walked on this earth. On top of that, its structure is difficult to discern. The author gives us few clues at how to outline his book. Ecclesiastes is a great blessing to study; it is also a great challenge.

In August of 1527 the plague was wreaking havoc in much of Germany. Out of fear of the plague a great number of students and professors left the university at Wittenberg. Martin Luther, however, continued lecturing to a small group of students who stayed behind. He decided to lecture on Ecclesiastes. By October, Luther wrote, “Solomon the preacher is giving me a hard time, as though he begrudged anyone lecturing on him.”² I’ve felt that way at times lately. Ecclesiastes is simply a difficult book to outline and to understand. However, as we dedicate ourselves to this task our labor in studying will be well rewarded.

Here is what I believe is going on in Ecclesiastes. It appears that Solomon has decided to attempt to understand the purpose and meaning of life from the perspective of the unbeliever. That is to say, he sets out on a mission to understand what can be gained from life, but he limits himself simply to that which is “under the sun.” And by “under the sun” he means that which has no reference to God or eternity.³ Again, he is considering this from the perspective of one who denies the faith, one who is an unbeliever. As he works his way through this journey, however, he pauses three times before his final conclusion to give us a glimpse of what his final answer is going to look like. And these glimpses along the way show us that apart from God life is simply meaningless and without purpose. We find these glimpses in Ecclesiastes 2:24-26; 5:18-20; 8:15; and his final conclusion in 12:13-14.⁴ Therefore, in this sermon, we begin the first leg of this four-part journey in attempting to understand if and where there is value and meaning in life.

I believe we will find it helpful as believers because it will drive home the meaninglessness of many things in the world that are tempting to us. I believe we will find this book to be a weapon in our fight against sin. And for the unbeliever, it will answer your questions and doubts about the Christian faith.

So, maybe you're here today and you're not a believer. You no doubt think this is nonsense. Why would we give our lives in devotion to a God we have never seen in hopes of a life after this one that none of us has visited? You no doubt think it's a waste even to gather here on Sunday mornings. After all, we are giving up part of a day in which you don't have to work. At least five days of our week are already taken up with work, and now we commit one of our free days to gathering, singing, praying, and hearing someone lecture for the better part of an hour.

So, let us then consider life on your terms. Let us see if your criticism for wasting life holds up when *your* life and practices are the ones scruti-

nized. What rich meaning and purpose is in life outside of considering God and eternity? What significance is found in life if we only evaluate what we can see with our eyes, what is under the sun? Solomon gives us his answer in this book.

WE CANNOT FIND MEANING IN THIS BASED ONLY ON WHAT WE SEE (1:1-11)

The author begins by identifying himself and then pointing out his thesis: if you look simply under the sun, then life is meaningless. He writes, “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (1:1-3).⁵

Then he goes on to point out in verses 4-8 that the earth and its cycles continue even after we die. The world keeps going on without us. Additionally, he notes that there is no true satisfaction for us in the time we are here. He writes:

A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing (1:4-8).

There is simply the endless running cycle of things in this earth, and never any real satisfaction and significance. On top of it all off, we forget what has come before us. Therefore, if we think anything is new it is simply evidence of the fact that we forget those who have come before us and what they have achieved. Again, Solomon writes, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and

there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has been already in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after us" (1:9-11).

The first reality that we should see if we try to find meaning, purpose, or value of our lives apart from God and eternity is that our lives will soon be forgotten among the coming generations. If you hope to find meaning for life under the sun, then the devastating reality is that you will one day be forgotten.

This past winter my wife and I were home visiting my parents when my dad talked me into cleaning out a storage shed with him. It was cold and dirty, and the job consisted of throwing broken chairs and other similar items into a landfill. It was not necessarily memorable work, but I don't think I will ever forget it. The reason I'll remember that day is because of the conversation my dad and I had while we were hurling these items into the ground. After we started loading the stuff up to haul off, my dad told me that he had paid to keep this storage shed and the stuff in it for something like twelve years. He had paid quite a bit of money to do that, and now we were throwing it away. He had paid a large sum of cash to store for years what we were now calling trash. I asked the obvious question, "Why?"

My dad's first answer was that it took him that long to convince someone to come help him throw it away. But his more serious answer was that these items belonged to his family from generations back. Some of the chairs we were throwing away had been handmade by his grandfather, great grandfather, and great-great grandfather. He pointed to items that he remembered sitting in his house when he was growing up. He remembered vaguely a few stories that his mother would tell about how they were made. Then my dad said, "I've held on to these things for a long time because of stories I cannot even remember and because of connections with people my children don't even

know. And some day somebody will be throwing away my junk that was held onto by someone else, and they won't even know who I am."

And you know what? He's right. Yet when I heard my dad say that, I almost wanted to convince him that we should stop loading this stuff up, put it back in the storage bin, and start making payments again. But he and I both knew that there would be no purpose to that.

This is exactly the point that Solomon is making. If all you bank on for hope and meaning in this life is that which is under the sun, then you need to realize that life will move on just fine when you are gone, and eventually you will be forgotten. My failure to recall even the names of those relatives my dad mentioned that day is evidence of the fact. Even the deaths of the most famous people of a given generation, though making headline news for days or weeks thereafter, are forgotten in time.

So, if you think that you can find meaning, purpose, and value in this life alone, then, Solomon tells us, you need to take off your rose-colored glasses. But if you think Solomon is drawing a conclusion that he does not have the authority to declare, then he points out his qualifications for making this statement in the next section of text.

SEEKING EVERYTHING THE WORLD VALUES WILL ONLY BRING EMPTINESS (1:12-2:23)

In 1:12-2:11 Solomon gives us his qualifications for being able to say this. First of all, he is someone who was among the wealthiest and most powerful persons in the world and as such had the ability and resources to undertake this quest to find out what life means. He writes,

I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow (1:12-18).

He was king, and he applied himself to this question of the meaning, purpose, and value of life. He used his means to observe life. He gained more wisdom and knowledge than all who had come before him, and he realized that the lack of the world being able to provide purpose and meaning is a reality that cannot be changed. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted (1:15). The more wisdom and knowledge he gained, the more his troubles and sorrows increased.

No doubt you have experienced this as well. Simply growing older brings realizations of greater problems and greater needs. Your troubles increase. Thus, Solomon points out that he is qualified to make this statement, and his statement still stands. Seeking everything this world has to offer is vanity; it only brings emptiness.

And in case we think he simply did not experience the greatest joys in this world or the highest degree of luxury available, Solomon shows us that his wealth and privilege makes even present-day millionaire socialites pale in comparison.

Solomon describes his experience at length:

I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven dur-

ing the few days of their life. I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the children of man. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun (2:1-11).

Solomon had all the riches one could desire. He sought out the greatest pleasure he could imagine. He withheld nothing from himself that his eyes desired. He built homes, cultivated lush gardens, and accumulated every object one could desire. The things you might be tempted to covet, he had he had in abundance. And then he declares that he considered all that he had done in seeking out these things, and he found that it was vanity. It brought only emptiness. It was like chasing after the wind. There was nothing lasting to be gained in it.

But we might say, if he sought things with more reward than simply riches, or music, or possessions, then he might find real meaning, purpose, and value in life. So, Solomon says that he considered wisdom and folly. After all, is there anything higher in life than wisdom? And Solomon acknowledges that indeed: "There is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in

his head, but the fool walks in darkness” (2:13-14). However, if you are just considering this life and what is under the sun, then Solomon points out that the same thing happens to the wise person and the foolish person. They both die. There is no enduring remembrance of the wise person over the foolish person. Eventually, both are forgotten. So, Solomon says, “I hated life, because of what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and striving after the wind” (2:17).

But what about leaving a legacy behind for those following you? That is a way to guarantee lasting purpose, meaning, and value to your life, it would seem. But Solomon points out that though you may leave all you have to one after you, you have no idea whether that person will be a fool or wise. You have no control, and eventually your possessions may be put to foolish use. Or they may simply be thrown in a landfill.

So, if we are honest, we must admit that Solomon is right. Yes, it’s a pessimistic view, but is that not because it is realistic? We all will die eventually. The world will go on without us. Our possessions will pass on to another. And all of our labor in this life will have no lasting value if this life is all there is. Solomon then is right—life is vanity.

Is there, then, any hope, purpose, meaning, and value to life? Yes. Lest we become too discouraged, Solomon directs us “above the sun” for a moment to hint at his conclusion.

LIVING UNTO GOD BRINGS MEANING AND PURPOSE (2:24-26)

Solomon gives us his first conclusion in his journey, writing,

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, this too from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting,

only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind (2:24-26).

Solomon says that what you should do in this life is to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in your labor. “But how” we might ask, “if all is ultimately meaningless?” Solomon answers, by telling us this is a gift we can have only from God’s hand. That is to say, we should live and find joy in what we do, but we will only have joy when we consider all things in relation to God, for the only way to find real meaning, purpose, and joy in life is to realize that everything we have comes from God, and that God is working all things for his eternal purposes.

If we seek meaning through gaining all that our heart desires in this life, we will find it vanity. However, if we see all of life as a gift from God, realize everything we do is being used by him to fulfill his ultimate purposes and plans, and see everything we do as something done to God’s glory, then we will find meaning in life, and then spend eternity with one beyond the sun.

Therefore, may we see Solomon’s first conclusion as an exhortation for the unbeliever to stop looking for meaning in this life alone and look instead to the God who made this world and sent his Son to die and be raised from the dead that we may have eternal life. Submit to God and infuse meaning into everything you do, even the mundane things, realizing that they can be done to the glory of God.

As for believers, let us: (1) recognize everything we have as a gift from God and everything we do as a means for God to fulfill his ultimate plans; (2) use this message as a weapon to fight against the temptation to focus our hopes and joys in things that are passing; and (3) take this good news that there is hope beyond what our eyes see to a world that needs desperately to bow the knee to Christ.

That day when my dad and I were cleaning out the storage unit, I found a cane that belonged to my grandpa. I kept it. I kept it not because I need a cane or value that piece of wood. I kept it so that one day I can tell my children that this cane

belonged to their great grandpa. But I will not follow that by telling them that he was a man who had great earthly riches—for he had very little. I will not tell them that he was a man of great education—for he did not even finish high school. But I will tell them that his life had eternal value because he believed the gospel, labored to serve God, taught his children the Scripture, and lived his life unto the glory of the Lord. Because of that, it was natural for him to teach his son the gospel. And it was because of his son, my dad, that my children now have a dad who believes the gospel and teaches them to believe as well. I will one day show my children that cane and tell them about a man who knew that there was more to life than what he could see under the sun and therefore placed his faith in the one who reigns above the sun.

ENDNOTES

¹This sermon was originally preached at Cornerstone Community Church in Jackson, Tennessee, on June 25, 2006. Slight modifications have been made for this present manuscript.

²Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career, 1521-1530* (trans. E. Theodore Bachmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 564-65.

³Tremper Longman writes, “In brief, Qohelet’s frequent use of the phrase *under the sun* highlights the restricted scope of his inquiry. His worldview does not allow him to take a transcendent yet immanent God into consideration in his quest for meaning.” Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 66. Similarly, see Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 288.

⁴Thus, the outline of the book of Ecclesiastes as I understand it is: 1-2; 3-5; 6:1-8:15; and 8:16-12:14. Similarly, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 21; Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 285-384 (although Estes separates the prologue and epilogue in his outline).

⁵All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.