LESSON 1

THE FUTILITY OF LIFE

Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

In this lesson we are introduced to the theme of Ecclesiastes.

OUTLINE

Many people today are searching for meaning in life, but in all the wrong places. Trying to find eternal meaning in a temporal world is like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. God made us for eternity, and only His eternal presence in our lives can satisfy our thirst for meaning.

I. The Futility of Life

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OVERVIEW

When social scientists from Johns Hopkins University surveyed nearly 8,000 students at 48 different colleges on what issues they considered most important in their lives, 16 percent said "making a lot of money" was their goal. But 75 percent said their primary goal was to find meaning and purpose in life.

Pastor Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose-Driven Life,* became a best seller because it focused on the need for every person to discover his or her purpose in life. In his book, Warren notes a survey conducted by Dr. Hugh Moorhead in which he wrote to 250 leading intellectuals and scientists asking them, "What is the meaning of life?" Most had little to offer in terms of a philosophy. In fact, some wrote Moorhead and said, "If you find out what the purpose of life is, please let me know."

A college student wrote this note before taking his own life: "To anyone in the world who cares, Who am I? Why am I living? Life has become stupid and purposeless. Nothing makes sense to me anymore. The questions I had when I came to college are still unanswered and now I am convinced there are no answers. There can only be pain and guilt and despair here in this world. My fear of death and the unknown is far less terrifying than the prospect of the unbearable frustration, futility, and hopelessness of continued existence."

The search for meaning and purpose in life is the most profound study upon which one can embark. And the book of Ecclesiastes, written by Solomon, chronicles his own search to find the purpose of life. It is unique in the Bible as it tells of a man's philosophical search for meaning and describes the conclusions he reached.

Solomon wrote three books: Song of Solomon as a young man; Proverbs as a middle-aged man; and Ecclesiastes in his latter years—his book of regrets. He looked back over his life and realized how many foolish choices he made in his search to find the meaning of life. Fortunately, he came to a godly conclusion at the end of the book, but it was too late for him to enjoy it personally.

Solomon was in a unique position to conduct a study on the meaning of life. His forty-year reign as king of Israel was a time of peace, so he was not occupied with wars. He had plenty of money and resources that allowed him to undertake a study. And he had the mental capacity to consider weighty matters: He was the wisest, smartest man of his age, perhaps of all time (1:16).

The word *ecclesiastes* means "the gathering." Solomon calls himself, in Hebrew, *qohelet*, or "the preacher" or "the quester." He was a man on a mission—a mission to discover the meaning of life.

Are you one of those people (like my dear wife) who will turn to the last chapter of a novel and read it first in order to learn the conclusion of the matter? Solomon saves you the trouble in Ecclesiastes. He states his conclusion right up front: "Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity" (1:2). The word *vanity* is used 38 times in Ecclesiastes. That qualifies it as a primary theme of the author. But it is not the vanity of beauty or vainglory we are familiar with today.

Instead, he means that life is something that doesn't work—it is a vain pursuit to try to find ultimate meaning in this life alone. Life is a vapor that is not permanent, Solomon concluded after his investigation. It will not bear the weighty title of Meaningful and Purposeful. "Vanity of vanities" is a Hebraism—a way in Solomon's language to express intensity. He was dead serious about the fact that the search for meaning in life alone is a vain pursuit. Because life is empty, Solomon asks, "What do people get for all their hard work under the sun?" (1:3, NLT)

Many have misunderstood Solomon's questions and answers. Here is the key to understanding the book: Solomon is describing life as if there is no God at all in the picture. And his conclusion is that life is meaningless without Him. His phrase "under the sun" (used 29 times in the book) is how he expresses his description of life in terms of the world without God. In this sense, Solomon is like many people today—trying to find meaning in life without God. In this book, Solomon will conclude that life has no meaning apart from God.

The Futility of Life

Solomon begins by teaching us four things about the futility of life.

The Course of Life

"One generation passes . . . and another generation comes" (verse 4). Solomon might have been reading one of our modern, small-town newspapers that records the births and deaths in the community on a daily basis. The same day a baby is born, an elderly person dies. Generations come and generations go. Man is transient, but the earth stays the same. Solomon is thinking about these issues as he nears the end of his own life.

In one of his books, Rabbi Harold Kushner recounts what a man told him in a conversation:

"Two weeks ago, for the first time in my life, I went to the funeral of a man my own age. I didn't know him well, but we worked together, talked to each other from time to time, had kids about the same age. He died suddenly over the weekend. A bunch of us went to the funeral, each of us thinking, 'It could just as easily have been me.' That was two weeks ago. They have already replaced him at the office. I hear his wife is moving out of state to live with her parents. Two weeks ago, he was working fifty feet away from me; and now it's as if he never existed. It's like a rock falling into a pool of water, and then the water is the same as it was before, but the rock isn't there anymore. Rabbi, I've hardly slept at all since then. I can't stop thinking that it could happen to me, and a few days later I will be forgotten as if I had never lived. Shouldn't a man's life be more than that?"

Many people are asking similar questions today. Isn't there more to life than the same daily cycle of work-sleep-work-sleep, followed by death? Solomon is saying that, from that perspective, life seems futile and meaningless. And it is hard to disagree with him.

The Circle of the Sun

Solomon says the cycle of meaninglessness is illustrated by the sun: "The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose" (verse 5). Modern astronomers talk about the sun rising and setting just as Solomon did. It's a figure of speech today since we know the sun doesn't "rise" and "set," but Solomon thought it moved across the sky in a repetitive cycle that was endless. Or meaningless, to be more precise. Rise, set, rise, set—every day the same thing.

The Circuit of the Winds

The wind is also a natural phenomenon that seems to follow endless paths in the sky: "The wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit" (verse 6). It is amazing that Solomon could make these observations about nature long before the modern scientific era with its analytical tools. We are used to seeing the satellite image maps that TV weathermen use to show the jet stream and its effects. But Solomon simply observed the cycles of nature in his search for meaning and concluded that even nature was repetitive and meaningless.

The Cycle of Water

Water is a great example of repetitiveness. "The rivers run into the sea," which never gets full. How does this happen? Solomon didn't know about evaporation that creates clouds that create rain that fills the rivers that run into the sea. But he saw a cycle which seemed just as meaningless as life.

The wind, the sun, the water—they're all like life. They come and they go, repeating themselves over and over. There is a mechanical monotony to the way the world turns, a seeming futility when you consider it apart from God.

Have you ever thought these thoughts? It's easy even for Christians to get caught up in the morose thinking of a world that seems pointless. We begin to wonder, "Why am I here?" When we fail to remember God, we can find ourselves as despondent as Solomon did.

The Frustration of Life

From the frustration of life, Solomon moves to the futility of life.

Nothing Is Fulfilling

We could easily translate verse 8 as, "Life is B-O-R-I-N-G!" There is a restlessness in the human heart apart from God, a restlessness borne out of a failure to find meaning. We are always looking for something new, something better, the next thing to fill the void we feel if we don't know God.

Isn't that what the entertainment industry is all about? And the devolution of that industry, where promoters and media executives are in a continual search for the next bizarre television show or form of entertainment that will occupy our bored and restless hearts? A person who doesn't have God in his life is focused on the lives of others—the stars, the wealthy, the interesting. We try to relieve our boredom by looking into the lives of others who, if truth be told, are as bored as everyone else—if they don't know God.

In Acts 17 we have the record of the apostle Paul's encounter with the Athenians who spent their time talking about what's new. Novelty . . . the latest and greatest . . . that's what they were all about. J. Vernon McGee used to say, "If it's new, it's not true; and if it's true, it's not new." And he was right.

The constant desire to acquire newer, better, bigger, and faster "things" is another evidence of our insatiable restlessness. Computers, televisions, electronic gadgets, cars, houses—even marriage partners—the constant quest for greener grass on the

other side of the fence is an evidence of our restless hearts, living life apart from God. Nothing can fulfill a heart that is centered only in this world.

Nothing Is Fresh

Not only is nothing fulfilling, nothing is fresh. Everything seems stale, something we've seen or done before. And it's true, for there is nothing new under the sun.

That may not resonate with you. There are new inventions, new products, new discoveries, new adventures. What Solomon means is that nothing new is being created by God. What God created in the beginning is all that has ever been created. Anything we invent is just a rearrangement of something God already created. Thomas Edison once said that his inventions were only applying the secrets of nature for the happiness of mankind. He created nothing new, for there is nothing new under the sun.

Solomon's message in this book is going to be that nothing in this world can fulfill or satisfy the longings of the human soul except God. Solomon knows this because at one time in his life he was close to God; he knew the fulfillment that God can bring. He prayed and God granted him a heart of wisdom. But he allowed his heart to be led away from God by his great wealth, wisdom, and women so that he died, I believe, a disillusioned and discouraged old man.

Solomon had once been connected to heaven, but he forsook the God of his youth and gradually lost the meaning of life. And he came to realize, expressed in Ecclesiastes, that life has no meaning apart from God. His decades-long search for fulfillment ended in frustration: "For who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow?" (6:12)

One of the keys to this book is found in 3:11: "He has put eternity in their hearts." The heart of man is oriented toward eternity, and there is nothing in this temporal world that can satisfy it. If we try to fill the eternity-shaped void in our heart with something temporal, it's like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. It won't fit and we walk away frustrated and confused.

The only way to experience the eternity that God put in your heart is to allow the eternal God to take up residence in your heart through Jesus Christ. It was this Jesus who said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10b). Only Jesus can give you the life you were created to enjoy.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever related to Solomon's feelings in the book of Ecclesiastes? Explain.

a. How would you describe the meaning of life in general?

b. What would your life be like without God?

c. Is it clear to see what lives void of God are like in our world?

d. Can we ever fall into the patterns of those who don't know Christ and chase the meaningless things of this world?

e. How can we avoid falling into that cycle?

f. What do you believe is the specific purpose of your life?

g. What practices and disciplines keep you focused on your true purpose and calling in life?

h. How content are you with the life you have at present? What would make you even more content?

2. Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10.

a. What does godliness with contentment produce? (verse 6)

b. Why is it futile to attach meaning to the biggest, fastest, and newest that this world has to offer? (verse 7)

c. How can finding contentment in money be a snare? (verse 9)

d. What is the difference between "money" and "the love of money"? (verse 10)

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 and talk about the following questions:

   a. What word does Solomon use repeatedly in Ecclesiastes?

   b. How does this differ from the vanity we are used to today?

   c. Explain the significance of verse 3.

   d. What does it mean that there is nothing new under the sun? (verse 9)

   e. What is the purpose of the book of Ecclesiastes? What does Solomon conclude?

   f. How does this tie in to Ecclesiastes 3:11?

2. According to the lesson, what four examples does Solomon use to teach us about the futility of life? Discuss each.

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3. Read Psalm 73 and discuss the following questions:
   a. What does the metaphor in verse 2 suggest?
   b. How does the psalmist summarize what almost caused him to stumble? (verse 3)

c. Explain verses 2-3 in terms of the meaning of life. How did the psalmist view his own life compared to the wicked?

d. What did he see in the wicked that made him think their lives were more meaningful than his? (verses 4-11)

e. How does he summarize the lives of the wicked? (verse 12)

f. What kind of life did the psalmist live? (verse 13)

g. What did he gain from his efforts? (verse 14)

h. Compare the understanding of life described in verse 16 with that in verse 17.

i. What ultimately gave meaning to his life? (verses 23-24)

j. What is the surest foundation in this world? (verse 26)

k. Compare Psalm 73:28 with Ecclesiastes 3:13-14. How are the conclusions of the psalmist and Solomon similar?

DID YOU KNOW?

Sometimes we get so caught up in modern scientific achievements that we forget the intellectual powers of the ancients. Solomon was not the only one who observed nature and drew conclusions about this world. The wise men who visited Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus did so as a result of observing the movement of stars in the heavens (Matthew 2:9). And Jesus made reference to the common practice in His day of predicting the weather based on the color of the sky: "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red'; and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times" (Matthew 16:2-3).