

Is life meaningless?

On Sunday we explored the book of Ecclesiastes. It was written by King Solomon at the end of his long life, an expression of the wisdom he acquired. The scriptures tell us that Solomon was the wisest person to ever live. In addition to wisdom, God blessed him with great wealth, power, fame, success, partners, children, and a long life. Solomon had it all, yet the book of Ecclesiastes counts it all for nothing.

1. Warm up Question: Pastor Chris shared the following story: A boy's parents were concerned because their son was failing his math classes. They sent him to a private Catholic school with a reputation for good results. After the first day he came racing in and went straight to his room. Concerned, they checked on him, only to find him hard at work on his homework. This went on for the rest of the year until he brought home an A+ in math. They asked what changed his mind about working hard in math. He replied: "On the first day when I walked into the classroom, I saw a guy nailed to the plus sign at the back of the room behind the teacher's desk and I knew they meant business!" That got his attention! Ecclesiastes was written by another teacher that meant business! Solomon is intense, and it is meant to get your attention. Have you ever had a teacher (school or life lessons) that got your attention with their intensity? Tell us about it.
2. In Ecclesiastes Chapter 1, Solomon explained his thesis for the rest of the book. To him "Everything is meaningless...completely meaningless!...blowing in the wind!...wearisome beyond description...boring...never changing...and *nobody* will remember you". How do you feel about Solomon's assessment of life? Does it resonate with you? Do you agree?
3. Many translations use the word "meaningless" for the Hebrew word "hevel". This idea is found over 40 times in the book of Ecclesiastes. Pastor Chris explained that "hevel" is more like "smoke" or "confusion". It is meant to convey the idea that it is just out of reach, just out of our understanding, or elusive. How does this change your understanding of Solomon's thesis above?
4. "Dukkah" is a Buddhist concept that means "reaching". They believe that the root of all suffering is in our "reaching" for one thing after another. This is very similar to the idea that Solomon is presenting. Have you ever noticed that your "reaching" or "striving" for something led to suffering? Have you ever found peace in letting go? How do you feel about the idea/phrase "leaving your burdens at the cross"?
5. Solomon had 3 great realizations during his life. The first was this: Time goes on and leaves you behind. You are just a blip in the great march of time. Nobody will remember you, or the things you have done. Ironic coming from someone we still talk about today, that lived 3000 years ago. Do you agree with his assessment? Do you seek permanence? How might you modify the idea?

6. Solomon's second great lesson was this: Death is the great equalizer. We are born out of the dust with nothing. No matter what we gather or do in this life we return to nakedness and dust. The Jewish idea of the afterlife at this time was a place of rest rather than the modern idea of heaven. How does your view of the afterlife impact this lesson?
7. Solomon's third great lesson was this: Life is unpredictable. Good things happen to good and bad people. Bad things happen to good and bad people. The world does not treat us differently if we do good or evil. As Stanley Kubrick said: "The most terrifying fact about the universe is not that it's hostile but that it's indifferent." This flew in the face of the common wisdom of Solomon's time, that stated that God blessed the righteous and cursed the wicked, but this was not the first scriptural challenge to this idea. The prophets had been railing against it since the earliest writings of Job. How do you feel about this lesson? Where is fairness or justice to be found? (Optional: Read and Discuss Matthew 20:1-16.)
8. After looking at all of this, Solomon offered two rules for living a good life. The first was to: Learn wisdom & Fear/Obey the Lord. Solomon admitted that lesson three (see question 7) opposed this rule, but insisted that it was the right thing to do, even if it did not result in the acquisition of a good or happy life. This rule was for the sake of morality. How do you feel about this rule? Is morality enough of a motivation?
9. Solomon's second rule was this: Stop grasping after the "hevel" or smoke. Enjoy the moment. Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die! How do you feel about this rule? How might the first rule be symbiotic with the second?
10. Solomon elaborated on this second rule with several ways that you could enjoy the moment. You could enjoy time with a friend, focus on the flavors and conversation during a good meal, or experience the warm rays of sunshine hitting your skin. Pastor Chris led everyone through an exercise encouraging them to slow down eating a raisin, to enjoy the various stages of consumption. What could you enjoy this week by slowing down a little?