

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Ecclesiastes

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How do you measure success?

Success is a topic addressed often in the Bible, particularly in those books in the middle of the Old Testament called the Wisdom books. These five books – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs – form what we have called the heart of the Old Testament. Rather than being about the nation of Israel, they are about individuals, expressing the highs and lows of an individual's life.

In Ecclesiastes we find somber material. If the book of Proverbs is about wisdom for people who *want* success, the book of Ecclesiastes offers wisdom for people who *have* success. Particularly, it is for individuals who have gotten what they wanted out of life, or at least what they *thought* they had wanted, and then have found it wanting.

Herman Melville called it “the truest of all books.” Thomas Wolfe described it as “the highest flower of poetry, eloquence and truth” and “the greatest single piece of writing I have known.”

But others describe it as possibly the “strangest” book in the Bible. Many statements in this book are puzzling. Others even seem to be false! The book's skepticism is shocking to many. It can feel cynical, even depressing.

So what is the message of this book? And what can we learn about success? To answer these questions, we must turn to the book itself.

Ecclesiastes consists of twelve chapters. A short prologue begins the book, and an even shorter epilogue ends it (1:1-11; 12:9-14). Everything in between is one long monologue by someone simply called *Qoheleth*, which, as we have seen, means “the Teacher.” We don't know who this Teacher was. He's never named in the book. Many have said that it was Solomon because of his fame for wisdom and because the opening lines of the book call him “son of David and king in Jerusalem.” Yet a Hebrew writer could have used this word “son” to refer to any direct male descendant of David, no matter how many generations later.

WHAT IS MEANINGLESS?

The Teacher's basic message is about meaninglessness. He begins in the second verse of the book, "'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless'" (1:2). "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (1:14; cf. 12:8). As one person said, this book starts out low and gets worse!

The word *hebel*, translated "meaninglessness" in the NIV or "vanity" in the KJV, occurs thirty-five times in this short book. It refers to something insubstantial and ephemeral, and therefore temporary and passing.

And what exactly does the Teacher say is meaningless? "Everything," he says. "Everything" falls under his charge.

What does he mean by "everything"? If we look through the book, we see that he does seem to mean *everything*!

Obvious Things

Clearly, he makes this charge against all the *obvious things* that we, too, would quickly recognize as meaningless. "**Much dreaming and many words,**" he says, "are meaningless" (5:7). The "**roving of the appetite**" is "meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (6:9). The "**laughter of fools**" is also meaningless, as long-lasting as "the crackling of thorns under the pot" (7:6).

Among the obvious things named by the Teacher as vain are the bad things. So the injustices of life he calls meaningless: "righteous men...get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men...get what the righteous deserve" (8:14). The fact that people get the opposite of what they deserve even seems to mock before all the world any claim that there is justice in life. The Teacher's objection sounds much like Job's (Job 21:7-11, 13). All such injustice, says the Teacher, is meaningless.

Questionable Things

Most interestingly, though, the Teacher turns his critical gaze upon things that might seem less obviously empty or wrong to us. These *questionable*, borderline, or neutral things, which we might be slower to categorically condemn, he also denounces as utterly vain!

Pleasure is the first such borderline thing to come under his critical gaze. "I thought in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is

good.’ But that also proved to be meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 2:1). In the verses that follow, he then explores the emptiness and worthlessness of pleasure (2:2-11).

More than in any other age, we today are openly and fully motivated by our desires, as if they were infallible revelations of truth. When, before our time, have pleasure and ease been so publicly acceptable as the justification for action or inaction?

But a wholesale condemnation of pleasure does seem to go too far, doesn’t it? “I refused my heart no pleasure,” he admits. But he finds all of it “meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (2:10, 11).

Popularity, or public approval, is a second borderline matter the Teacher quickly dismisses as meaningless:

Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king’s successor. There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind (4:13-16).

We don’t know what particular historical episodes the Teacher had in mind, as he spoke of kings replacing kings replacing kings – public opinion rising and falling all the while. Perhaps he was thinking about the discontent the people of Israel began to feel with the line of David and the ensuing rebellion that divided the nation into the northern and southern kingdoms.

If you happen to make your livelihood by cultivating public approval, as many do in the city of Washington, D.C., take heed. Whether through disaffection or simply mortality, popularity is a passing them.

Popularity is not the ultimate reality, says the Teacher. If you doubt this now, a day will come when you won’t.

Good Things

What is still more amazing, however, is how the Teacher’s charge extends even to the things we would call good. These are the passages that most disturb us.

For example, the Teacher declares that **“youth and vigor are meaningless”** (11:10). Now this is news! We take youth and vigor as self-evidently good. No, they are not good for everything, but they are certainly coveted and desired, and most of us would hardly refer to them as “meaningless”! But the Teacher does.

Not only that, he denounces as meaningless the very thing that most of the original readers would have given – and most readers today give – their lives for: **work**, as well as the wealth and achievements work brings. All this the Teacher un.masks as meaningless. “What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?” he asks in chapter 1 (v. 3). The answer comes in chapter 2 (2:4-11).

How does the Teacher respond to this discovery? “So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (2:17).

The love of money is also meaningless: “Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless” (5:10). In general, the realities of this world mean that creating wealth will never be fulfilling, either because you will not have the family to leave it to, or you will run out of time to enjoy it yourself (4:8; 6:1-9).

Indeed, reaching the bottom of his despair, the Teacher refers to his own life as “meaningless” (7:15).

I think we have answered the question we asked at the beginning – what does he mean by “everything”? By “everything” he seems to mean everything. His twelve-chapters-long monologue concludes with the words he began with: “‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Everything is meaningless!’” (12:8)

Robert Gordis has written, “Whoever has dreamed great dreams in his youth and seen the vision flee, or has loved and lost or has beaten barehanded at the fortress of injustice and come back bleeding and broken, has passed [the Teacher’s] door, and tarried a while beneath the shadow of his roof.”

Picture again that image of chasing the wind. You are standing outside. You feel strong gusts of air on your face and hands. And you begin to chase those gusts. Will you catch them? Would this not be completely pointless? You might as well chase after meaning in this world, says the Teacher of Ecclesiastes. So he pursues

us, relentlessly pointing toward and exposing the meaninglessness of any life so wrongly spent.

Yet two questions for us remain. First, why does he say that everything is meaningless? Second, how should we respond?

WHY IS EVERYTHING MEANINGLESS?

“There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow” (1:11). Okay, so the meaninglessness of everything has something to do with our inability to remember anything. Regardless of the wealth, splendor, or accomplishments of a man, he will be forgotten.

“For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered;
In days to come both will be forgotten.
Like the fool, the wise man too must die! (2:13-16)

Here we come to the real culprit behind meaninglessness. No person will be remembered, finally, because everyone dies. It isn't that the Teacher sees nothing good in wisdom. Wisdom is better than folly, he says. But he is frustrated by the fact that both the fool and the wise man come to the same end. They will both be forgotten because both will die.

You know, of course, that everything has a basic plot. If you have ever seen one episode of the old television show Gilligan's Island, you have seen them all. Every episode begins with some sort of crisis. Onto the island stumbles a well-meaning but hapless individual who has somehow managed to find this island on which Gilligan and his friends are stranded – which no competent rescuer has been able to find! Some mayhem or mix-up follows, with either a romance or a scam. An escape for Gilligan looks possible. But then, must as mysteriously as the outsider appeared, he disappears. There must have been more than 740 people who got off that island while that series ran. But none of them were Gilligan!

Did you know that the Bible, too, has a basic pattern. The basic biblical pattern can be summarized with the simple chain of creation, fall, and re-creation. God creates something good. Man sins and ruins what God has created. But hope remains because of God's grace called re-creation.

The book of Ecclesiastes in particular plays a special role in explicating and expounding the devastating effects of the Fall, which is helpful for a day like ours that idolizes the creation rather than the Creator, this life rather than the Author of this life. The Teacher points to the meaninglessness that death imposes on everything in this life. Indeed, it is death that evacuates meaning from our world, frustrating our hopes and foiling our plans.

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

In your own life, I am sure you have noticed how much easier it is to trust someone who has been through what you have been through; who has struggled with your struggles; who can accurately voice your difficulties because he or she has “been there.” When such a person commends faith, we don’t respond, “He hasn’t experienced the depths of evil that I have experienced. If only he had seen what I have seen, he couldn’t come up with such clap-trap.” No, we trust him. And Ecclesiastes, with its realistic appraisal of death and the futility of life, leaves the most skeptical among us feeling that it’s reliable. The Teacher insists that we listen long and hard to the bad news before he will allow us to consider the good.

Without an honest look at the curse of death and futility, we miss a key piece of the puzzle that no amount of feel-good optimism can adequately replace. Ecclesiastes is powerful exactly because it presents the tension and struggle between the Teacher’s sense of futility and his very real faith in the God who is true, between the way things are and the way they ought to be.

At one point in his life, apparently, the Teacher tried to reconcile these two things. But he learned better: “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (1:14). And here we come to the key to understanding Ecclesiastes: the phrase “under the sun.” It occurs twenty-eight times in this short book, and it refers to life as viewed entirely from the perspective of this earth, a life considered apart from God. Such a truncated and circumscribed life, of course, is meaningless. “All come from dust, and to dust all return” (3:20).

Hear him! This world is a bad place for your final investment! It was not made for that! As long as you keep trying to cobble together meaning from the scraps of this world, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes will pursue you and point out the paltry and passing, flimsy and fleeting nature of your materials. As the Teacher says, God has “set eternity” in our hearts (3:11). Yes, our lives are lived out under the sun,

but our hearts' desires stretch infinitely beyond the horizon. Eternity goes beyond the sphere of what is under this sun.

In the last few verses, we read, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (12:13-14).

For life to have meaning, we need what lies beyond it. We need judgment (cf. 8:10-13; 12:14); and we need hope. It is because God the Author will finally evaluate what we do that life has meaning.

CONCLUSION

So is futility final? No, Ecclesiastes was never meant to be a substitute for the whole Bible. Outside of the answer that is found in Christ, there is no final answer to the futility of life. Only God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ assures us that there is something beyond the sun and beyond the grave. In that sense, the good news that we as Christians have to share is the key to getting "beyond the sun." Christ came to live, die, and rise again order to bring us for givens of sins and a restored relationship with God.

"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

"Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58b).

We will find meaning only when meaning extends beyond this life and world. Only eternity with God makes a life "successful" and "worth living." And we will find such meaning only in Christ.