

2018 SPRING CONNECT SERIES – ECCLESIASTES

Part 1: What Gives Something Meaning?

Russ Ramsey and Stacey Croft, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee

Opening Question:

Name something someone has done for you (or you've done for yourself) that has particular meaning to you (even if it doesn't mean anything to anyone else).

Scripture:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 (ESV)

¹For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

²a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹What gain has the worker from his toil? ¹⁰I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. ¹¹He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹²I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; ¹³also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.

¹⁴I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. ¹⁵That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.

Reflection:

When we ascribe meaning to something we give it our attention, love, and the full weight of our lives. But what if the object we ascribe meaning to is, as the 'Preacher' of Ecclesiastes considered, "vapor"? That is, it is impossible to try to grasp what is one moment here and then gone. Does this drive us to be hopeless cynics or to look to what can hold the weight of ultimate meaning? C.S. Lewis wrote described this cynicism well when he said, "But you cannot go on 'explaining

away' for ever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on "seeing through" things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too?....a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'See through' all things is the same as not to see." (*The Abolition of Man*)

As the Preacher asserts, we must learn that fearing God provides the true view of meaning in this life. Learning the truth of meaning comes through ascribing weight and substance only to the One who is meant to hold it. God Himself.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think people chase after meaning and purpose in life? Based on this text, what gives life meaning? Conversely, what doesn't give life meaning? What does it mean for something to have lasting significance?
- When you read the first 8 verses of this passage, what is your response? What do you think Solomon is trying to convey?
- What does it mean that "God has put eternity into man's heart"?
- Why, following this famous list from Ecclesiastes, does Solomon conclude "there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live"?

Closing with Prayer

Use this time to pray together regarding what you seek for meaning and for God to teach you to fear Him to make sense of meaning.

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Part 2: Mortality

Russ Ramsey and Stacey Croft, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee

Opening Question:

What was your earliest encounter with mortality? When do you first remember your awareness of both your life and the sobriety of death?

Scripture:

Ecclesiastes 9:1-10 (ESV)

¹But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him. ²It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. ³This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. ⁴But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. ⁶Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

⁷Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

⁸Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

⁹Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. ¹⁰Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

Reflection:

When we have moments to stop and consider our mortality, it can be unnerving. It can cause us to despair or reexamine the direction of our life altogether. The book of Ecclesiastes calls us to examine death in order to celebrate life. The question is do we celebrate or fall into despair? How do we celebrate? NT Wright spoke of making sense of death well when he said, “The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice, and love have won... Take away Easter and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christianity of ignoring problems of the material world. Take it away and Freud was probably right to say Christianity is wish-fulfillment. Take it away and Nietzsche probably was right to say it was for wimps.”

Solomon wants us to 'lay to our hearts to examine' this: death is certain for all of us but does it drive us to life? There is no way to predict our death but we can celebrate the life the Lord has given us by His hand. In showing how to love this life and our care for it, we are showing our thankfulness for the gift God has given us. As CS Lewis said, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this."

Discussion Questions

- This passage says that our lives and deeds are in the hands of God. What do you think this means?
- What does it look like for a person who believes in the resurrection of Jesus to have a mature view of their own mortality?
- This passage suggests that the reality of death is a reason to actively celebrate life. Do you celebrate being alive? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

Closing with Prayer

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Part 3: Wealth

Russ Ramsey and Stacey Croft, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee

Opening Question:

What is the worst job you've ever had?

Scripture:

Ecclesiastes 4:4-16 (ESV)

The Loneliness of Wealth

⁴Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

⁵The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.

⁶Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

⁷Again, I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ¹¹Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹²And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

¹³Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. ¹⁴For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. ¹⁵I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. ¹⁶There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Reflection:

If we are honest, how much does our view of wealth impact our lives? PT Barnum said, "Money is a terrible master but an excellent servant." The Bible is consistently describing money in illustrations such as a tower we find security in or as "a root of all kinds of evil." What is the metaphor that your work and wealth create for you? Are we willing to admit the control wealth has over our lives and what type of 'master' wealth is to us? Wealth is a moving target in our culture because it is something we need and yet when do we ever have enough? Solomon provides many pictures of wealth and work with its particular connection to loneliness. Often our wealth is given power to connect us to others and yet leaves us 'unhappy' and isolated. We live for our work

and wealth trying to the reverse the curse on it when this only proves as a “striving after the wind”. But there has only been one who was able to reverse the curse over our work and wealth. Only one who could say “it is finished” in his work so that our striving would be for something more. Jesus is the one who reversed the curse so we can approach our work and wealth with hope in the midst of vanity.

Discussion Questions

- The heading for this passage in some bible translations is “The Loneliness of Wealth.” In what ways have you seen wealth lead to loneliness—in yourself or in others?
- How do you personally feel when you read in Scripture that work can be “vanity and a striving after wind”?
- Do you ever ask the question: “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?” How would you answer that question about your work?
- How is work redeemed for the follower of Jesus?

Closing with Prayer

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Part 4: Wisdom and Folly

Russ Ramsey and Stacey Croft, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee

Opening Question:

Name someone who imparted true wisdom to you when you were young. What did they teach you?

Scripture:

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 (ESV)

¹²I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³And 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. ¹⁴I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

¹⁵What is crooked cannot be made straight,
and what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶I 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.” ¹⁷And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

¹⁸For in much wisdom is much vexation,
and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17 (ESV)

¹²So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. ¹³Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. ¹⁴The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. ¹⁵Then I said in my heart, “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?” And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. ¹⁶For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! ¹⁷So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

Reflection:

Everyone is looking for wisdom and advice to make sense of life. We are all seeking the right combination that will make our lives happy and complete. In fact, we surround ourselves with different advice all day long to provide this perfect combination. Solomon, however, wants us to see that seeking wisdom doesn't bring perfection, but can bring even more of an awareness of imperfection. To the degree you 'understand' is also to the same degree you 'increase in sorrow'

because of your understanding of the true realities of life. That is, with joy you understand more suffering and with victory you can see more tragedy. And if we depend on wisdom, what separates the fool and the wise? Both the wise and the fool face death. If we make wisdom our end, then we are no different than a fool.

Then what is the point of wisdom? GK Chesterton described it well when he said, “To accept everything is an exercise, to understand everything a strain. The poet only desires exaltation and expansion, a world to stretch himself in. The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.” This doesn’t leave us to deny wisdom but rather to embrace that we are fools. True wisdom is knowledge of our limits and how foolish we are. But even more so, the Gospel presents wisdom through how God became foolish to save fools and make us wise. This is what the Apostle Paul meant by “the cross is foolishness”. True wisdom is displayed for fools like us to be made wise in Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

- What are some examples of things you think might fit into the category of things people do that are, ultimately, vanity and a striving after the wind?
- What does Solomon mean when he writes, “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow”?
- How does Solomon describe the difference between someone who is wise, and a fool? In what ways do you see this play out in life?
- The book of Ecclesiastes doesn’t always run to put a nice bow on the end of a hard statement. Is there wisdom in this? Why do you think God doesn’t feel the need to qualify every verse with assurances that we’re all doing okay?

Closing with Prayer
