

MEANING IN THE MIDST OF THE MESS

In the "Peanuts" comic strip, Charlie Brown and Lucy are having a philosophical conversation. Lucy says, "Life is like a deck chair, Charlie Brown. Some place it so they can see where they are going; some place it so they can see where they have been; and some place it so they can see where they are at present." Charlie Brown replies, "I can't even get mine unfolded."

In the book of Ecclesiastes, like Charlie Brown, King Solomon is having a hard time getting his deck chair unfolded. He's having difficulty making sense out of life.

Life can sometimes be perplexing. Winston Churchill once described the country of Russia as "A riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." That's how I often feel about life. As one person said, "Life goes on - I just forgot why!"

Life is a knot that refuses to come untangled. It's a dilemma, a predicament, a puzzle. We be-

gin life as if it were a rainbow, and at the end we expect to find the proverbial pot of gold, but that's not the way it always pans out. One commentator has suggested that the author's intent in Ecclesiastes, "Is to show us that at the end of life's rainbow there lies not a pot of gold but a pot of salty liver soup."

How do you feel about life when things don't go as you expected? All too often concepts like *fairness and fulfillment* seem like a *fleeting fantasy*. Life can be hard. It's often filled with *disappointment and disillusionment*. You'll relate to Ecclesiastes if life has ever left you with a bitter taste in your mouth.

Chuck Colson writes, "Life isn't logical, or sensible, or orderly. Life is a mess most of the time. And theology must be lived in the midst of that mess." The book of Ecclesiastes is Solomon's attempt to find *meaning in the midst of the mess!*

ECCLESIASTES... THE PREACHER

The book begins, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." The word "*Ecclesiastes*" is a Greek word that can be translated into English as the word "*Preacher*". Solomon is king of Israel, but for a time he assumes the role of a preacher to teach his people, *and all people*, an important lesson about life.

Remember, Solomon began his career a godly man. In the beginning he served and respected God. But there was a period in his life when he turned his back *on God*, and tried to find meaning and purpose in life *apart from God!*

And if ever there was a man who could've achieved such a goal, it would've been Solomon. The Bible tells us Solomon was the *wisest* and *wealthiest* man who ever lived. Scholars would come from all over the world to match wits with the renowned king. They would come to Jerusalem for "*a battle of brains*", but one by one they would leave marveling at the king's overpowering wisdom.

Solomon also had *cash to flash*. His yearly

stipend was 666 talents of gold. A talent was around 100 pounds, so Solomon's annual income was 66,600 pounds of gold, or a million ounces. At current gold prices, that's over \$400 million a year.

One Old Testament scholar writes, "No era of Israel's history was richer in possibilities for various pleasures, and no person in a better position to make the most of them than Solomon." Solomon used his position, power, and purse to experiment with everything imaginable in pursuit of deep down fulfillment.

He traveled down the path of science and philosophy, he turned to pleasure, then to achievement, he moved on to religion, materialism, fame, and power. He contemplated the value of hard work, long life, a large family, a good name. And the book of Ecclesiastes is Solomon's report. Here he recounts his trek down these different avenues and pauses to reflect on his findings.

Devotion Box - Sharpen Your Ax

Verse 10 is another way of saying, "Don't work harder, work smarter." The preacher tells us, "If the ax is dull, and one does not sharpen the edge, then he must use more strength; but wisdom brings success."

Once two lumberjacks squared off in a wood chopping contest. The young contestant was full of energy and stamina, and he chopped non-stop for an hour. The older contestant would get winded, and would stop for short intervals. To everyone's surprise, the old man won. When asked how he could chop more wood while stopping every few minutes to rest he corrected the reporter, "I wasn't stopping to rest. I was stopping to sharpen my ax." He was a wise man. If you're in a demanding work environment, don't just throw more effort and energy at your work. First, think through better ways to get the job done.

VANITY, VANITY... UNDER THE SUN

Ecclesiastes 1:2-3 read, "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?"

This is an eloquent way of saying, "Why bother to roll out of the sack?" "What's the use in getting up in the morning and facing another day?" It's all vanity!

The word "vanity" is the key word in Ecclesiastes. It means "vapor or mist", and it implies "an emptiness, dissatisfaction, unfulfillment." It's modern day equivalent is the phrase, "whatever". "Whatever, man!" is the modern way of saying "Why bother? Who cares? Hey, nothing really matters anyway! It's all vanity!"

The word "vanity" appears 37 times in Ecclesiastes. It sums up how Solomon feels about life. Without God, life is no more meaningful than a puff of breath on cold winter morning. The word "vanity" could be translated "whatever is left after you break a soap bubble". Life without God is like chasing after soap bubbles. Your kids will chase and chase those little bubbles, but the instant they capture the prize, it pops and they're left with nothing to show for their efforts.

Another key phrase in Ecclesiastes appears in verse 3, "under the sun". The phrase occurs 29 times in Ecclesiastes. In his quest for meaning Solomon limited his search to things under the sun - *not heavenly things but earthly things*. His boundaries were here *below*: material, physical pursuits. He tried to keep God out of the picture. He tried to make sense out of a life without God.

Solomon is not the only man who has tried to find mean-

ing in life apart from God. Other brilliant men have tried and came to the same conclusion... George Bernard Shaw once moaned, "Life is a series of inspired follies."

A French proverb reads, "Life is an onion. When it's peeled there's nothing left, and one cries the whole time peeling it." Rabbi Sholom Aleichem once wrote, "Life is a blister on top of a tumor, and a boil on top of that."

If all there is to life is what's "under the sun" I, too, would be a pessimist. But there's more to life than just what's "under the sun!" Jesus said in John 10:10 "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." And 1 Corinthians 15:58 encourages us by saying, "that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

All is not vanity. Life is not worthless. Life can be satisfying and fulfilling when you look "above the sun" - when you look to Jesus. Look *under the sun* and life's a drag, but look to the *Son (S-O-N)*, and life takes on a whole new meaning.

When we come to Christ and get in touch with God - as we relate our lives to Him - the value of all life gets "marked up". Our everyday existence takes on an eternal significance. HG Wells once wrote: "Until a man has found God and been found by God, he begins at no beginning, he works to no end. He may have his friendships, his partial loyalties, his scraps of honor. But all these things fall into place, and life falls into place, only with God." This is the truth Solomon discovers.

Devotion Box - Eternity In Our Hearts

In Ecclesiastes 3:11 we're told, "(God) has put eternity in their hearts..." Inside every person there's a tugging, a longing, a frustration that can only be satisfied by a touch of eternity. This is the *hunger of the human heart!* There's a "hole in our hearts"... And neither enjoyment or employment can fill that hole. Try to force an object or activity other than God into that hole, and it refuses to fit. The hole inside is a God-shaped void that only He can fill! St. Augustine prayed: "You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in You." Beyond time we sense an eternity, and we long to experience it's reality. Philip Yancey writes, "Made for another home, made for eternity, we finally realize that nothing this side of timeless Paradise will quiet the rumors of discontent."

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

Solomon hates to disappoint those who *revel* in the *novel*, but there's nothing new under sun.

He says in 1:9-10, "That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us." Look at today's fashions... My son thinks the clothes I wore 20 years ago are "cool". What goes around comes around. Styles are cyclical. Hold on to your outdated clothes long enough and they'll eventually be back in style.

The Greeks said, "The ancients have stolen all our best ideas." A philosopher put it, "They that come after us will see nothing new, and they who went before us saw nothing

more than we have seen."

There's nothing new under the sun.

This is why we need to beware about religious teachings that claim to be new. Satan is always dressing up old ideas and repackaging them in new containers. For example, if you really study "new age" religion you'll realize its nothing but the "old lie" Satan sold to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, when he promised them that if they ate of the forbidden fruit they could be their own gods.

Guys, always remember, "If it's new, it's not true; and if it's true, it's not new." Only Jesus can do a truly new work. He puts a new song on our lips, a new desire in our hearts. He gives us a new start, a new hope, a new life.

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

In chapter 2 Solomon searches for purpose on the road of pleasure. Verses 1-3, "I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure"; but surely, this also was vanity. I said of laughter - "Madness!"; and of mirth, "What does it accomplish?" I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives."

Here the *Hebrew* becomes a *hedonist*. Solomon tries to find meaning in pleasure. He becomes a "party animal". He "*Grabs for all the gusto*" - "*If it feels good, do it.*" The Reebok commercial becomes his mad motto: "Life is short- play hard" and wow, did Solomon play hard... Solomon's palace in Jerusalem was a *perpetual party*. His parties made the strip in Las Vegas look like a sideshow at a two-bit carnival. Solomon *partied hearty*, but he found *no peace in his pleasure, no satisfaction in his sensuality, no real contentment in his carnal cravings*.

If ever there were people trying to duplicate Solomon's pursuit they would be 21st century Americans. We are truly a pleasure-crazed society.

Did you know, "Every week in the United States: 12 million golfers vie for tee-times, 9 million tennis players compete across the nets, 4 million skiers glide down the slopes, and each year 23 million hunters and fisherman comb the woods and fish the creeks." Many people are doing so trying to fill an emptiness inside... trying to find a reason for living in the pursuit of pleasure!

Here's a nutshell analysis of today's world, "Anything goes, but nothing lasts". The same could be said of Solomon "*He had it all... but nothing mattered.*"

When the woman at the well came seeking mere water, Jesus told her, "You'll thirst again". We ought to turn that into a plaque and hang it over every source of modern day pleasure: *sex, drugs, fame, money, athletics, entertain-*

ment... "you'll thirst again". You may get it... but it will never be enough. Only Jesus can quench the thirst of the soul. Only He can manufacture real satisfaction!

After a time Solomon's search for meaning turned from *enjoyment to employment* - from what he could *consume* to what he could *construct*. He tried his hand at business. He went about building himself an empire!

Yet he says in 2:4-11 that all the ambition led to the conclusion, "*So what! Big deal! What profit is mere profit?*"

No less an authority on money than the Wall Street Journal says, "Money is an article which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven, and as a universal provider of everything except happiness."

There is a Jewish proverb which says, "Shrouds have no pockets". I've never seen a hearse pulling a U-haul. Perhaps God is making a point, if you can't take it with you, money is not all that important. Solomon concluded that *purpose* is not found in a *purse* - a person's *worth* isn't in a *wallet*. This was the same discovery that Solomon made.

Solomon also sought meaning through fame and power. Chapter 4:13 tells a rags to riches story about a king who rises from poverty to sit on the throne, *but..* In 4:16 he confesses, "There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king; yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind." Why work hard to be famous, if you're forgotten the moment you're gone? *The star* ends up being a mere *shooting star*.

Who remembers our 25th President? Who won the World Series in 1952? Or the Masters Championship in 1977? Who founded General Motors? Who invented the ball point pen? Who was the 3rd and 4th men to walk on the moon?

All these accomplishments were big deals at the time, but who remembers them now? Fame is both fickle and fleeting.

Devotion Box - The Preacher's Bottom Line

In 5:18-20 Solomon draws a conclusion, "Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor - this is the gift of God. For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart."

From Solomon's tone to this point, we might think he would advise us to live a austere life - develop a poverty mentality - to separate ourselves from things that are material or physical. But instead Solomon says we should enjoy the gifts God gives us: take a walk in the park, relish the smile on a child's face, savor a steak for dinner, celebrate over a successful sale, or the victory by your favorite team. 1 Timothy 6:17 tells us that "God gives us richly all things to enjoy".

Here's the preacher's bottom line... *enjoy life, just don't expect more out of it than it can give.*

A new mom thinks her child is going to end her unhappiness and bring fulfillment - SORRY! That baby may cause her a few unhappy nights. A businessman longs for a promotion, thinking if he gets it, all

his problems will be over - SORRY! There will be new headaches with the new job. A single thinks if she can just get married her life will find new meaning - SORRY! Marriage is great, but it's not the secret to happiness.

Generally speaking, life is good, but our problem is we expect out of it more than it can produce. Life under the sun will never bring true peace and purpose. It will never bring *ultimate* satisfaction. Half the time we don't really enjoy the blessings God gives us, because we're expecting too much out of them.

Hey, taken in and of itself everything in life is vanity - the job - the home - even the kids. So you brought kids into the world, *for what?* So they can bring kids into the world, then die? And their kids can bring kids into the world, then die? And where does the cycle lead ultimately... what does it really accomplish?

There used to be a TV show entitled, "*My So-called Life*". That's probably the title Solomon would've given to his life - for he had discovered that life, in and of itself, is nothing but frustration, hassles, and pain. It's a "*so-called life*". Life becomes meaningful only as it relates to God - when it's "*marked up*" with eternal value. Solomon is saying that the gifts of God can't truly be enjoyed and appreciated apart from the God who gives the gifts! It's God who gives life meaning!

If you have questions on tonight's study email Pastor Sandy - sandyadams@calvarychapel.org

Calvary Chapel Announcements - October 15, 2000 - 10/17—Ladies Prayer & Praise Brunch; 10/29—Baby Dedications; 10/31—Hallelujah Fest - "The Greatest Show on Earth"

For back issues of Bible Scan study guides: www.calvarychapel.org/stonemountain/biblescan.htm

Next Bible Scan - October 22 - Song of Solomon 1-8

"He has made everything beautiful in its time..." - Ecclesiastes 3:11

Memory Verse

LIFE'S NUMBER ONE FRUSTRATION

In chapter 9 Solomon brings up life's number one frustration. The greatest problem with life is death. Death spoils everything! 9:3 says, "...one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead."

Death is the common denominator. It's been said, "The statistics on death are quite impressive: one out of every one person dies." Comedian Woody Allen cracks, "It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens." But he will be! It doesn't matter who you are, one day you're going to die! Death is unavoidable. "Under the sun", men share a common destiny... death. It's "above the sun" where the road forks. One road leads to heaven, and the other road runs to hell.

In the middle of Ecclesiastes 9 the preacher draws some conclusions. In light of the inevitability of death he makes four important suggestions...

First, *enjoy life*. Verse 7, "eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart..." Life is too short to worry, or sulk. Take God's blessings and enjoy them to the fullest. The only time to savor earth's joys is while on earth.

Second, *make sure you're right with God*. Verses 7-8, "for

God has already accepted your works. Let your garments always be white, and let your head lack no oil." White is a symbol of righteousness, oil of the Holy Spirit. The whole point of *life below* is to get to know God, and prepare ourselves for the *life above*.

Third, *love your spouse*. Verse 9, "Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun..." Guys, life is too short to spend it fighting and fussing. Get over it, and love each other. A tombstone read, "To my beloved husband, Walter. May he rest in peace - *until we meet again*." As a Christian you're committed to your spouse "*until death do you part*." You're stuck. There's no way out, so you might as well work at it - make the best of it - learn to get along. Live in harmony. Love your spouse!

Fourth, *if there's something worth doing, give it your best effort*. Verse 10 tells us, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going."

When you're dead and gone there are no comebacks - no second chances. Life is too short for half-hearted commitments. If there's a cause, or job, or deed worth doing, then give it all you've got. Give it your very best shot!

Devotion Box - Dare To Try

Verse 1, "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days." When a merchant traveled to a distant port to buy goods he'd load his purchase on a cargo ship to sail it home - but he was taking a risk. What if the ship was lost at sea, or looted by pirates? There were anxious days waiting on his purchase to arrive, but usually his bread returned, and netted a handsome profit.

Life as a whole is full of risk. Be afraid to go out on a limb - live a timid life - never dare... and you'll probably never achieve much. Hey, "nothing ventured, nothing gained." Cast your bread on the waters, and God will bring it back home.

I grew up watching Olympic snow-skiing champion Jean-Claude Killy. Killy had a motto, "To win you've got to risk losing." It's been said, "You can't steal home and keep your foot on third base."

A group of elderly folks were surveyed, and asked what they would do differently if they could live their lives over. One of the most frequent answers was, "I would have taken more risks when I was younger." They played it too safe. Guys, "You may be disappointed if you fail, but you are doomed if you never try."

Devotion Box - The Conclusion ...

In 12:8 the preacher sounds one more flurry of vanities, before he draws his final conclusion in verse 13, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all." Here is the conclusion of the experiment... Solomon has tried all that life has to offer, and he's discovered the only thing that really matters in life is to fear God and keep His commandments.

To fear God, is to realize God knows better how I should live than I do! He's the Designer and Creator of life - our final authority. To fear God is to bow my knee before Him, and ask, "*God what will you have me to do?*" That's it! That's the whole reason any of us exist...

Reinhold Messner was the first of two men to climb Mt Everest without an oxygen bottle. Then he decided he needed to climb Everest by himself - and he succeeded. Afterwards Messner was asked - as are all mountain climbers - "Why did you do it?" Messner replied, "Because at the top all the lines converge." That's the way it is in life. "*Under the sun*..." from a strictly human perspective, life is a pain - it's a puzzle with numerous missing pieces - but when you dedicate your life to Jesus - *and focus above the sun* - the pieces begin to come together.