

Is Life Really Meaningless?

Moving From Vanity to Purpose to Joy

by Joe Slunaker

Have you ever stepped back, taken an introspective glance at life, and thought, “Is this all there is? What is the meaning of life?” If you have, you are in good company. Even biblical characters wrestled with these questions, and none more so than the “Teacher” (Hebrew: Qoheleth) in the book of Ecclesiastes. The author introduces this Solomonic persona at the start of the book who reflects his raw and filterless perspective on a long life of accomplishment. What is the Teacher’s conclusion? Everything in life is meaningless (Ecclesiastes 12:8)!

Hold on. This seems a stark contrast to Paul’s commonly quoted New Testament prescriptions to “rejoice always” and “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Paul’s perspective seems unrealistically optimistic when you consider our short, often difficult days. Why the difference between the two authors? Interestingly, we are going to find more in common between Paul and the Teacher than meets the eye.

Life lacks real substance

Imagine yourself grasping at a passing breeze. This is how the Teacher describes most activities in life (e.g. Ecclesiastes 1:14). His choice word to describe this is vanity (Hebrew: hevel, meaning “vapor” or something that lacks any real substance. So what exactly is the Teacher calling vapor? Many of the Teacher’s complaints in Ecclesiastes seem stereotypical of a biblical message: debauchery (Ecclesiastes 2:1-3), luxury (Ecclesiastes 2:4-), materialism (Ecclesiastes 2:7), and sex (Ecclesiastes 2:8). However, he levels the same complaint of worthlessness at some surprising topics: wisdom (Ecclesiastes 1:16), marriage (Ecclesiastes 9:9), hard work (Ecclesiastes 4:1-8), saving for the future (Ecclesiastes 2:18-23), and giving to others (Ecclesiastes 6:1-6).

Talk about a list of complaints! The Teacher’s negative perspective on even the positive things of life is jarring. Should we explain away his viewpoint as an ironic monologue of pessimism? It seems the author won’t let us. The author, who preserves these complaints, maintains that the Teacher “uprightly wrote words of truth” (Ecclesiastes 12:10). Should we then conclude that life really is meaningless?

One key ingredient to life's purpose

The author unveils his key message in the climactic conclusion: “*The last word, when all is heard: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this concerns all humankind; because God will bring to judgment every work, with all its hidden qualities, whether good or bad.*” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

Life's meaning comes from God

The author invites us into a new world of perspective, moving from vanity to purpose to joy. Life is indeed meaningless without God. This existence is indeed a passing vapor without God. But God gives the worthlessness of life, worth. God gives the purposelessness of life, purpose. A life oriented around the Creator will develop a substance to grasp whereas without him there is only striving after wind. The author brings us to this conclusion through the complaint of the Teacher, and it seems as if we are invited in some way to follow the thought progression ourselves:

1. Consider our momentary worldly existence (e.g. Ecclesiastes 2:1).

2. Recognize the utter vanity of our short experience (e.g. Ecclesiastes 1:2).
3. Complain freely to God about the lack of purpose in our lives (e.g. Ecclesiastes 2:11).
4. Realize that knowing God gives meaning to even the smallest and most mundane moments (e.g. Ecclesiastes 12:9-14).
5. Rejoice in knowing God and live your life (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Maybe the author and Teacher in Ecclesiastes are closer to Paul in perspective than we thought after all. A closer look at Paul's writings show he also complains about hardship (2 Corinthians 1:8) and considers good things to be worthless (Philippians 3:8-10). Nevertheless he concludes all things should be done to the glory of God (Colossians 3:17). Maybe "rejoicing always" is the end of a process that starts with being real with God yet moves beyond complaint to recognize the God-given purpose in even the most ordinary aspects of life.