

Does Life Have Meaning?

From the Series, "Solomon Teaches Us the Meaning of Life"

By Phil Brainerd

Introduction

Every now and then, people start to think. And when they do, they ask, "What is the meaning of life? People have been asking that for a long time.

In our modern world, how do we go about finding the answer? Well, this is the 21st century. We have the Internet. So, we go to one of our favorite search engines, Google, and we type in the question: "What is the meaning of life?" In only a microsecond, we see myriads of answers.

Here's the first one. It's from a group called "Oxford Languages".

"The condition that distinguishes animals and plants from inorganic matter, including the capacity for growth, reproduction, functional activity, and continual change preceding death." To this we reply:

"Come on, Google. You know better than that. I know we said we wanted the meaning of life, but you must know that we're not just looking for the dictionary definition."



Fortunately, Google doesn't stop there - They give us a list of sources. So, we move on to look for more help. The next stop is Wikipedia. I had a lot of students over the years who thought Wikipedia was the ultimate source of truth. My fellow professors and I had to remind students all the time that Wikipedia has some very serious limitations. More on that at another time. For now, let's see what they have to say.

Wikipedia actually has an article entitled, "Meaning of Life". In that article, they visit multiple philosophies and ideas. At one point, they include a picture painted by the great artist Rembrandt. It's called, "The Philosopher in Meditation." As you look at this painting, you see a medieval a man is pondering the meaning of life. His expression is somehow peaceful but serious.

Then, the Wikipedia people include a painting from another man. His name is Edvard Munch. As he contemplated the meaning of life, he was led to paint something he called: "The Scream". The title says it all. I guess his pondering led him in a different direction than Rembrandt.

So, when you get an answer to the question of life, should you reflect with hope, or should you scream?

There are a lot of opinions on the meaning of life. As we were studying Matthew's Gospel a while back, we ran into an interesting quote from Jesus.

The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom. (Matthew 12:42)

We learned when we studied this that the "Queen of the South" was the famous "Queen of Sheba." Apparently, she found herself looking for the meaning of life. She heard that there was a man living to her north who was reported to be the wisest man ever to live, so she decided it was worth loading up a caravan and travelling over a thousand miles to hear what this man had to say.

If we're looking for the meaning of life, perhaps this man, Solomon, is where we should go? However, he lived three thousand years ago. How could we meet him? It turns out that he did a lot of writing. One of his books is in the Bible. It's called "Ecclesiastes".

So today, we're going to start a short series based on that book. We're calling it: "King Solomon Teaches Us About the Meaning of Life." For our first session, we'll ask the question: "Does life have meaning?"

Let's see what King Solomon has to say in his famous book.

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: (Ecclesiastes 1:1)

We're hearing from someone called "The Teacher" (Many translations say, "Preacher"). That title means we're dealing with someone who has something to say. He's going to proclaim it, and we should listen.

What else do we about this man? He's a son of David, and a King. We could spend all day doing detective work, but for now let's just say that many people believe this is the great King Solomon. Solomon was a king and a child of King David.

It's interesting – David had many sons. Of those sons, Solomon was not the first in line to become king. The first in line was Amnon. He was the first and the oldest son of David. Sadly, he was driven by sin. His sins caused him to be murdered by Absalom, the next-in-line to the throne. Absalom would have been the king had he not for his violent disposition. This was compounded by impatience. He decided he didn't want to wait around until his father died. Instead, Absalom started a revolution. He lost and died on the battlefield.

Even after all this, Solomon still wasn't next in line. However, after all the disruptions, the normal method of determining a king wasn't working. King David had to look at his remaining family and use something better than birth order as the criteria. We don't know when he saw it, but David recognized something special about Solomon. So, he chose Solomon to follow him.

The thing that David saw didn't become apparent to others until after he died, and Solomon was on the throne for a short while. We read about it in a well-known story in I Kings:

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." (1 Kings 3:5)

Imagine that: The Lord God, the high king of the universe appears and says, "Ask for whatever you want." What would you ask for? Well, here's what Solomon wanted:

Solomon answered, "You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day. 7 "Now, Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. 8 Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number." 9 So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" (vs. 6-9)

What did Solomon have that his brothers didn't? Unlike his brothers, who let power go to their heads before they were anywhere near the throne, Solomon cared about the people he was going to rule. More than that, he didn't just care for them as people. He understood who these people were. They were God's people. They were his treasured possession.

Here is God's response:

10 The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. 11 So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, 12 I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. 13 Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. (vs 10-13)

So God granted Solomon's request and made him wise. And not just wise – the wisest. There was no one wiser before him. There would never be anyone after.

Now we know who the teacher is -The great King Solomon, the wisest man ever to live. Surely he will know the answer to that eternal question, "What is the meaning of life?" So, we join in the great caravan with the Queen of Sheba. We travel a thousand miles across a blazing desert. We climb the ivory stairs to the throne of the great ancient king. When we get there, we ask: "Oh, great king, what is the meaning of life?"

We find the answer in the second sentence of Solomon's book:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher.
“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.”
(Ecclesiastes 1:2)

After all this, we finally get to ask the wisest man in the world about the meaning of life. Here's his answer: There isn't any!

Is that all Solomon has to say? Did we just blow a ticket on the caravan for this? Should we all leave and go home? Well, you know how these wise men are - They're complex. Let's see if we can find an answer by reading a little more.

The Meaning of “Meaningless”

First, what does that word mean? “Meaningless.” In the original language, it's a word that means, “breath” or “vapor”. Think way back to your youth and remember the first time you walked out on a cold day and saw your breath. If you live in a warmer climate, you've no doubt seen pictures. It's fascinating. You exhale and see that wonderful cloud coming out of your mouth. But then, it disappears. According to Solomon, that's life - Something that's here one minute, and then gone. Why does he think that? Let's read on.

3 What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?
4 Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.
5 The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
Ecclesiastes 1:3-5

Solomon looked all around him. He looked to the left. He looked to the right. What did he see? He saw people, and he saw things. He saw people working with the things. Those people were laboring and toiling. But you know something? None of that effort seemed to produce anything permanent.

Look at verse 4:

4 Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.

What's Solomon saying? When you think about it, life is full of repeated activities. You wake up in the morning, you eat breakfast. Most people eat off plates. And they use silverware or other utensils. At some point, you get a pile of dirty plates and utensils. So, you clean the plates and silverware. Then, you eat another meal. Now, you have more dirty stuff that needs to be cleaned.

The interval may vary from family to family. The size of the pile may vary. But everyone goes through this cycle for their entire life. Clean – dirty – clean – dirty.

It's the same with laundry. You start with clean clothes. At some point, the clothes get dirty. So, you launder the clothes and start again.

Now, maybe you're the person who washes the dishes. Maybe you're not. One way or the other, you have something in your life that appears to endlessly repeat.

Solomon gives us a few more images.

The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
(Ecclesiastes 1:5)

Every day, the sun does its thing. That can be a good thing if you're a plant - You need that sunshine. That can be a bad thing if you were up all night with a crying child. All the other chores are still waiting for you when the sun comes up.

And there's more:

6 The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.
7 All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
(vs. 6-7)

The wind just keeps blowing. The streams flow into the sea, but the sea is never full. I like that last one. Imagine sitting in ancient days and realizing that lots of water flows into the sea, but somehow you can't see any come out. Today, we understand about evaporation and how water leaves the sea and makes it to the mountains, but understanding it still doesn't change the fact that the cycles of life repeat over and over again.

How does that make people feel?

8 All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.
9 What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.
(vs. 8-9)

Look at that: “All things are wearisome...” This all wears on us. Probably no one in modern times told it better than a poor dock worker named Joe in the musical “Showboat”. He sang the famous song, “Old Man River”

Ol' Man River, that Ol' Man River
He must know somethin', but he don't say nothin'
He just keeps rollin', he keeps on rollin' along

He don't plant taters, and he don't plant cotton
And them what plants 'em is soon forgotten
But Ol' Man River, he jest keeps rollin' along

You and me, we sweat and strain
Bodies all achin' and wracked with pain
Tote that barge and lift that bale
Ya get a little drunk then ya lands in jail

I gets weary and sick of tryin'
I'm tired of livin', and scared of dyin'
And Ol' Man River, he just keeps rollin' along

Old Joe may have been a poor dock worker, But he’s saying the same thing as the wealthy King Solomon. Maybe the amount of money you make doesn’t really change the reality of the world?

How This Comes Together

So, in all of this, are we stuck with depression and hopelessness? Does life in fact lack meaning? No. Not at all. We’re going to find as we examine Solomon’s book, Ecclesiastes, that there is much to learn about meaning in life. In this article, we’re going to summarize the answer.

Here's how we're going to do that: We're going to employ an important technique for successful Bible study. Here it is. Ready?

Whenever you study a book of the Bible, read the whole book.

I've read to the end of Ecclesiastes, and the answer is there. So, let's skip ahead.

Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.
(Ecclesiastes 12:13)

So, there is meaning to be found in life. We'll get more details in the coming articles, but here's what you need to start: First, fear God. Without God, there is no meaning. Remember that painting, "The Scream"? That was painted by a man who didn't believe in God. If you try to find meaning without God, that's what you get.

In the first few sentences of Solomon's book, you see what happens if you look around at life without including God - You see never ending cycles of work and toil that don't amount to anything permanent. It's only when you look up and include God that you begin to find meaning.

Now, here's a vitally important point: It's not just believing that God is there - You must **fear** God. The word that we translate as "fear" could also mean: "Have awesome respect". Why should you have awesome respect for God? Because it's right. We're told in the text we just read that this is the duty of all mankind. That's our purpose in life.

So, does "awesome respect" mean that mean we should walk around saying, "I respect you, I respect you, I respect you"? No. It means: "Keep his commandments." We show that we have awesome respect for God by doing what says.

Next: In order to do what God says, we must know what he says. That means read and understand God's Word. The Bible.

After that, we need to include something that came after Solomon. A thousand years after the time that Solomon lived, another man came - The only man wiser than Solomon. That was Jesus Christ. He was God visiting the face of the earth. Early in our discussion, we learned about the Queen of Sheba. We didn't read the whole quote. Here it is:

The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, ***and now something greater than Solomon is here.*** (Matthew 12:42, emphasis mine)

So today, doing what God says means doing what Jesus says. Here's one of the most important things he says: Jesus died on a cross to pay for the sins of the world. He calls on us to believe in him and follow him. If you've never done that before, let us tell you how. There is important information at the end of this article that will help you.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

In this article, we've begun a journey to find the meaning of life. We're doing it by joining with a multitude of people, including the Queen of Sheba, who sat at the feet of the great King Solomon.

We learned that meaning is only found when you believe in God, when you fear God, when you know what God says, and you obey.

May God help us to do all those things and more as we discover his meaning and purpose in our lives.

And watch for our next article as King Solomon teaches us more about the meaning of life.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church: TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site: PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site: PeaceWithGod.net
