

Is Life Meaningless or Purposeful

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who gives us purpose and meaning in our lives, Jesus Christ our Savior and our Lord, amen.

Have you ever left a job or even an entire career you loved? When I was an Air Force Officer I thought I was sort of important. I mean I had at one time over 100 people working for me. When I spoke people listened and usually did what I said. I used to think I held my part of the United States Air Force together. I thought I was a somebody... As my retirement date drew closer I thought this place is going to fall apart when I leave! Nobody can do what I do! Well, guess what. When I finally did retire from the Air Force the place didn't fall apart. It's still running along, maybe not quite as smoothly without me... When I look back on that Air Force career I see plainly that after every move the office I left got along just fine without me. Was my work in vain? Were all the battles I fought for naught? According to the author of Ecclesiastes maybe they were...

Although the book of Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom literature in the Bible, it's more like skeptical or cynical wisdom. The name of the book, Ecclesiastes comes from the ancient Hebrew word *Qōheleṭ*, which means one who gathers and assembles. This would have been a teacher. The Greek word Ecclesiastes takes it a step further to mean someone who addresses a public assembly, such as a preacher. So, Ecclesiastes refers to a person who is either the teacher or the preacher, you can pick for yourself... The book of Ecclesiastes is a

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gathering of wisdom, as cynical as it is, and was attributed to King Solomon, David's son and successor. I think the book was attributed to him because of the stories where Solomon asked God for Wisdom when he could have asked for anything in the world. There's also the story about the baby and the two women who both claimed to be the child's mother. Solomon figured that one out... Most scholars today say this book was written several hundred years after King Solomon's death.

Whoever the author was, the book starts out by declaring everything in life to be vanity. That's a strange thing to call all of God's creation. The highest crowning achievements of humankind are nothing but smoke that vanishes in the breeze. You work all your life to accomplish something, but in the end you face the exact same fate as the fool who never accomplished a thing. Even the wealth you build up goes to someone else after you're gone. Here I always thought I was the cynical one, but this teacher or preacher puts me to shame in the cynic department. If all you have to go on is reading this book of the Bible you'd be hard pressed to know why God created us and all the stuff of creation only to watch it decay and die. This teacher has spent a lifetime investigating, gathering knowledge about wisdom and foolishness. His insights come out of a life of searching for the lasting good or the true purpose of our existence. Despite proclaiming life is all vanity this teacher still advises us to pursue life to the fullest.

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When he says life is all vanity the Hebrew word he used was *hebel*. It can also mean futility, meaninglessness, mystery, enigma, absurdity, irony, or brevity. He says this because in his investigation he has realized everything in God's good creation is subject to death and decay. Given that fact, he describes all of human endeavor is a brief flash in the pan with little or no lasting permanence. Is life meaningless or a mystery? Is it brief, futile and absurd?

We don't like to talk about death. In modern social circles talk of death is actually a taboo subject. Imagine a swank Beverly Hills party at one of those huge multi-million-dollar mansions when one of the guests mentions a friend who has cancer and another friend asks how long they think she has to live. The mere mention of the cancer patient and her eventual demise casts a shroud over the entire party. Here's the dirty little secret. The death rate in Beverly Hills is exactly the same as it is in Greenville, Pittsburg, and Arcanum. It's 100 percent... We will all face the same fate and what's more so do all the animals and plants God placed on this planet. Death is the great equalizer as the saying goes. Faced with this fact, what do you conclude about the ultimate purpose of this life?

I read the entire book of Ecclesiastes trying to find the Gospel good news. About the best I could come up with was life has its highs and lows. God's creation seems to flow through time in seasons and there does actually seem to be a time for every purpose under heaven. Even considering the eventual death of

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everyone and everything, I refuse to believe life is meaningless with no Godly purpose. This teacher is really saying the human dilemma is that we overvalue everything in life, from our families to our material possessions. We look to these things as our security, as the foundation of all that exists and to define a life well lived. A better foundation and a truer measure of the real value of life is how much we loved the Lord our God who created us and who sustains us and who provides everything we need for our very existence.

So, what is the relevance of this book of vanities to our lives today? What is our bottom line take away from reading this book of skeptical wisdom? I'll try to make this point with another Air Force story. When I was stationed at Randolph AFB in San Antonio Texas, one of my main tasks was to rewrite the Air Force regulation dealing with people who work on or around our Nuclear weapons systems. This was called the Personnel Reliability Program and the requirements of this regulation were meant to ensure only the best possible people had access to our nuclear arsenal. The requirements for reliability for nuclear duties is even more important than keeping our classified information safe. This regulation ensures we only have people of the highest ethical, moral, and professional standards working on or near these highly destructive weapons. It governed who could be assigned to these kinds of jobs and how to deal with every possible issue a person could have from financial trouble to mental illness to poor work ethic and

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was over 500 pages. The goal of the Personnel Reliability Program was to describe in detail how to keep the nuts away from the nukes... My job was to rewrite the document and change it from a regulation with many words and pages to an Air Force Instruction of about 20 pages or less. It took over a year to write such a small document because I had to coordinate with many Air Force personnel who had been involved in keeping the nuts out of the nuclear business for their entire careers and they didn't necessarily buy into the Air Force Chief of Staff's vision. The huge size of the regulation came about because of every issue or problem that had happened in dealing with people who do some really stupid things that make you doubt their ability to handle the demanding nature of working near nuclear weapons. In the end I was able to get the Air Force Instruction published and it even had my name as the author at the bottom of the first page. When that project was complete I felt like I had climbed Mount Everest. My bosses were extremely delighted and I was given lots of accolades. Then I moved on to my next assignment. Within a couple of years the Chief of Staff who ordered the regulations to be rewritten retired and an new Chief was appointed by the President. Guess what... He didn't care so much about reducing the size of the documents that govern how the Air Force operates and they appointed my predecessor to rewrite that Personnel Reliability Program instruction. It didn't go back to its former volume, but it did at least triple in size over the version I had

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worked so hard to publish. All my toil and hard work vanished in one decision made by some General Officer at the Pentagon. My time rewriting the PRP guidance was a season of my life. I didn't think it would vanish so quickly. I didn't even keep a copy that had my name on it... I know you all have had similar experiences. You toiled away, but all your hard work was gone before you knew or expected it to be. It can be easy to fall into despair when you witness your hard work get washed away or used up. Futile days and futile weeks we may have, where life loses its glue and turns leaky at the seams, but a futile life will not be our last word. The Good News of Jesus Christ is too good to let that happen. Life is filled with meaning because He is making all things new. This good news doesn't just stop there. Jesus has invited you and me into this mission of bringing his message of salvation to all people in every land and in every tongue. We are blessed by God to let God's love flow through us into a lost and broken world. You can be the one to share God's Word of life in Jesus Christ to someone who is caught up in the despair of all the vanity in this broken creation.

May you be blessed with a time for every purpose under heaven. May the Lord grant you a strong sense of your purpose so you may experience the joy of and the feeling of accomplishment that comes with doing a job well done for the glory of the one who created you and gives your life meaning. Amen.