

Confessions of a King

June 16, 2024

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; 12:9-14

Session Outline

1. Solomon's Search (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18)
2. Choose True Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 12:9-12)
3. In Conclusion (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

Theological Theme

The only way to find meaning and significance in life is to be in right relationship with the Lord.

Call to Action

In what do we place our worth, our hopes, and our energy? At the end of the day, will we find we have feared God and kept His commands or simply spent a lifetime chasing after the wind?





Leader Guide

Confessions of a King

Introduction

Religions around the world prey on those searching for the meaning of life. This is an age-old question that prompts people to follow those they believe have answers. Sadly, many people take advantage of seekers and lead them astray. The Bible teaches that true meaning in life is only found in a relationship with Jesus Christ.


-  What are some ways you see people searching for meaning outside of Christ?
-  How have you done this at points in your life?

Session Summary

After many chapters chronicling his search for significance, Solomon shared the conclusions from his search. It was only after wrestling through his experiences and the things he witnessed that Solomon concluded that meaning, significance, and satisfaction are only found in knowing, trusting, and obeying God. When we understand that everything matters, we learn that the most important choice we will ever make is our decision about Jesus. Remembering that eternity and judgment are coming for everyone is an important motivation that every day matters because decisions made today will affect eternity.

1. Solomon's Search (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18)


The beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes introduces us to the purpose of the book as well as the writer. Referring to himself as the Teacher, Solomon shared all he observed and learned about the meaning of life. Solomon is widely known for the wisdom he received from the Lord. When given the opportunity to ask for anything of God, Solomon requested wisdom (1 Kings 3). If anyone could discover the answer to the meaninglessness of life, it makes sense that it would be the man who had the most wisdom.

-  What would you ask for if given the same opportunity as Solomon in 1 Kings 3? What does it say of Solomon that he asked for wisdom above all else?

Solomon's view of life was "under the sun" (v. 14) and limited to what he could see. Man's work, accomplishments, and searching yields no answers. Even though Solomon was wiser than others, his perception was still limited to the earth and, without the Lord, his search would be futile. This reality reminds us of our continual need for the Lord and our inability to find the deep answers of life apart from Him. Even in relationship with Him, we don't receive all the answers we desire, but we can trust that He knows and holds all things.

Searching for the answers initially brought the Teacher more frustration and futility. What was under the sun didn't have what he was looking for and the task of man felt burdensome and heavy. How often does life seem that way today? The answers we want can't be found under the sun but only in the Lord. When we dedicate ourselves to searching in the wrong places, we will only find frustration and despair.

Among the aspects of life Solomon found meaningless were work, nature, and wisdom. Solomon made it clear that our motives and expectations, rather than these things themselves, is where the meaningless lies. Solomon's goal was not to devalue things like work or wisdom but rather to make clear there is no firm foundation on earth in which we can find meaning and fulfillment. Such things will only be found when we see the Lord as the goal and purpose of our existence.

 Where do you need to be reminded of your dependence on the Lord? Why is this concept challenging for us?

As so often happens in life, when the Teacher failed to look for meaning from an eternal perspective, he turned inward. This world continually encourages people to find power and strength within themselves. This is a problem just as it was in Solomon's day because trusting in ourselves will always fail us. When we search deep inside ourselves, we don't find the wisdom we need because that can only be found in the Lord and seeing life from His eternal perspective.

Solomon set his heart and mind toward this search, but his repeated and intensified efforts failed to bring the meaning he needed. Feeling futile about his endeavor, Solomon compared his efforts with trying to grasp the wind. No matter how hard he tried or diligently he searched, the answers eluded him. Think about times in your life when you have been searching in a similar way and felt like your efforts were futile.

The more Solomon understood life under the sun, the more he felt despair. It has been said the more you learn, the more you realize how much you don't know. Tied to this revelation for the Teacher is the more

you know, the more sorrow you experience. Consider this reality in your life. With the internet and social media, people are connected to more news, information, and situations than ever before. This puts more weight on the mental, spiritual, and emotional health of individuals as they have much more to process and handle. Like Solomon, it seems that the more we know, the more of life's sorrow we bear.



Application: How have you experienced the truth that the more you know, the more sorrow you have?

2. Choose true Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 12:9-12)

Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon sought pleasure in laughter (2:2), wine (2:3), great projects (2:4-6), possessions (2:7), money (2:8), sex (2:8), and wisdom (2:12-16). None of these things satisfied his soul. He said all these pursuits were “futile and a pursuit of the wind” (2:11). This tells us something very important about the things of the world: they cannot free us from life's frustrations. These things were never meant to satisfy. Our hearts were made to delight in God, the source of ultimate glory. We should view hobbies, entertainment, and work as things that should point us to the Lord.

When we recognize that all we have as a gift from God, we can begin to seek ways to glorify God with what we have. We can use entertainment to strengthen bonds with non-Christian friends who we might later share the gospel with. As we accumulate money, we can invest more of it in kingdom purposes like funding missionaries and feeding the hungry. If we really believe the Lord is the source of ultimate glory, we should constantly be asking ourselves how we might store up treasure in heaven by using what God gives us to honor Him and build His kingdom. We know that only those who trust Christ will experience eternal happiness with Him in heaven. On the day of judgment, the Lord will bring everything to light, and those who have trusted Him will prosper in eternity while those who have looked to themselves will go to eternal punishment (Matthew 25:31-46).

Although it brought discouragement about the meaning of life, Solomon's search for knowledge didn't leave him less wise. He was still wise and a teacher of the people. He shared the things he observed and concluded for all those who read it to glean from, expressing his confidence that words have the power to teach, encourage, challenge, and change people.


The Teacher understood his responsibility to proclaim God's truth to others. The Teacher was intentional about his words. He weighed and studied with great care what to say and how to say it. This is a good reminder that our message can be clouded if the words we use, the way

we speak, or the things we do tells a different story. This is especially true when speaking with non-believers. Wisdom displays care with our words and actions so what we say agrees with our intentions.


 How do our words reveal wisdom or a lack thereof?

We should seek to speak truth and share the words given by the one true Shepherd. When you don't have the right words, you can look to Scripture for wisdom. Solomon said much study can be wearisome, and we need to be willing to put in the effort to know truth so we can share it with others.

Solomon likened the effect of the words of a wise person to goads or well driven nails. A goad is used to spur on an animal, to poke or prod it along and get it moving in the right direction. How often have you experienced wise words being the exact thing to prompt you along? The well driven nails analogy speaks to the way the right words can pierce and stick uprightly in the memory.

 When have you received wise words that prompted you on the right path or pierced your heart and mind as Solomon described?

Solomon also included a word of caution to not believe everything you read because it is not all from the Lord. There will always be those who try to lead God's people astray and disguise their false teachings to sound like truth. Today, so many years after Solomon wrote his warnings, we have even more information available to sift through, and his cautions easily apply to the things written in our time. We must always guard what we allow into our minds and what we allow to influence our lives.

 Application: How can you practice wisdom by being careful of the way you let the wisdom of the world influence you? How do we keep focus on the things of God when faced with conflicting ideas?

3. In Conclusion (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

After recording all he learned from his questions and observations, Solomon finally summed up his conclusions in two strong statements. This last chapter of Ecclesiastes is the culmination of Solomon's speculation and searching over his years as king. Although some people will always get caught up in a quest for meaning or significance, the responsibility of believers remains the same.

In Ecclesiastes 12:13, the command to fear God is elevated to the supreme principle of life. A proper fear of God is not a slavish dread that God will harm us if we displease Him. A proper fear of God is the attitude of a


mature believer who recognizes the holiness of God and the reverence He deserves. We choose to obey His commands as we honor who He is.

The Conclusion

The pursuit of wealth, knowledge, and political power is ultimately unsatisfactory and leads to divine judgment. Life is short and full of mystery. All our attempts to make life meaningful fail. The wise response, therefore, is to cling to God and His grace.

A person who fears God shows respect for the power and greatness of the Lord and responds to Him by obeying His commands and submitting to His lordship. Solomon declared that this is what a life of faith is all about. To follow the Lord is to trust Him, depend on Him, and do what He says. This is simple but it takes intentionality because it goes against the human nature and the world we live in.

Hindsight gave Solomon revelatory wisdom. He confessed that living life for oneself and apart from the Lord is not the way to go because it results in a life spent in vain. Only a life lived with God brings satisfaction and fulfillment. Anyone who desires true significance existence needs to live for God and with God. He makes life and death meaningful for those who live in right relationship with Him.

 What stands out to you the most from Solomon's conclusions? How does a right fear of God lead to obedience?

Nothing dishonors God more than willfully disregarding His commands. Once again, we see the compatibility of love and the meaning of fear in Ecclesiastes 12:13. We can “know that we love God’s children: when we love God and obey his commands” (1 John 5:2). This level of obedience is the example that Jesus set for us. By leaving heaven and coming to earth to be a sacrifice for us, Jesus demonstrated that obedience is rooted in love for God and worship of Him. When we obey God, we follow Jesus’s lead.

Solomon stressed that every person would answer for the choices they made at the judgment. Though a person’s body would go into the ground, the soul would face the Lord, and they would be judged for the life they lived and the choices they made. This certain judgment should be acknowledged and motivate the choices made during life on earth.

 How does a long perspective on life and eternity provide motivation for living rightly with God and others?

Solomon’s message in Ecclesiastes is not that nothing matters. In fact, it is the opposite—everything matters. The way we live our lives matters. The truths we stand on matter. Everything we say and do matters in light of eternity, and we will answer for all of it. It also matters how we use the talents, gifts, and resources we have been given from God. Above all, the decision each person makes about Jesus is what ultimately matters most. Trusting Jesus ensures a life of meaning, saves us from the vanity of the world, and gives us hope beyond death into eternity.

- Application: What needs to change about your relationship with Jesus so you are living the most meaningful and satisfying life possible with Him?

Conclusion

Being in right relationship with God is the only way to find meaning and avoid being caught up in the vanity of living as if this life is all there is. Having an eternal perspective is key. We should remember the fact that every person who lives will die and face judgment to answer for the choices made in this life. This motivates us to live rightly before God and to seek to influence others to do the same.

- When have you felt like you were pursuing the wind in seeking meaning in life?
- How can having an eternal perspective change the way you view the things that regularly discourage or frustrate you in life?
- How can you seek a gospel conversation with another person by sharing Solomon's teaching from Ecclesiastes?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for loving you and satisfying you. Confess the ways you have searched for meaning apart from Him. Ask Him to give you an eternal perspective each day.

Memory Verse

When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is this: fear God and keep his commands, because this is for all humanity. — Ecclesiastes 12:13

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Ecclesiastes* by Daniel Akin, Jonathan Akin, and Tony Merida
- *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* by Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes
- *Be Satisfied* by Warren Wiersbe

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Ecclesiastes

Purpose

Ecclesiastes shows us that since we and our works are futile—that is, destined to perish—we must not waste our lives trying to justify our existence with pursuits that ultimately mean nothing. Put simply, Ecclesiastes examines major endeavors of life in light of the reality of death.

Author

According to 1:1 and 1:12, the author was David's son and a king over Israel from Jerusalem. Also, 12:9 speaks of the author as a writer of proverbs, so Solomon appears to be the author. Many scholars believe that Ecclesiastes was written too late in Israel's history for this to be true, and they want to date the book at least five hundred years after Solomon's time (later than 450 BC). However, strong evidence attests that the book does come from the age of Solomon. For instance, it displays a great knowledge of literature from early Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Setting

Ecclesiastes is Wisdom literature, meaning that it is in the part of the Bible especially concerned with helping readers cope with the practical and philosophical issues of life. It has roots in the Wisdom literature of Egypt and Babylon. Books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are the biblical answer to the search for truth. Proverbs is basic wisdom, giving the reader fundamental principles to live by. Ecclesiastes, by contrast, is for a more mature reader. It engages the question of whether death nullifies all purpose and meaning in life.

Special Features

The Bible is never shy about confronting painful truths or hard questions. The book of Ecclesiastes faces the issue of how we can find meaning in life in light of the seemingly futile nature of everything. It will not allow the reader to retreat into superficial answers. It does not answer this problem by comforting us with hollow slogans. To the contrary, its motto is "Everything Is Futile." But by forcing us to face the futility of human existence, it guides us to a life free of empty purpose and deceitful vindication.

Extended Commentary

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

1:12 A king does not stop serving as king until he dies. The phrase have been king does not mean that the Teacher had stopped being king. Rather, the point is that he had, in his lifetime, been in a position to have the wealth and freedom to carry out the investigations described in this book.

1:13 The quest for wisdom is usually thought of as noble and fulfilling, but it is here called this miserable task, meaning that it is just a hard job.

1:15 This verse is a proverb. What is crooked cannot be straightened refers to a problem that cannot be solved. What is lacking cannot be counted refers to working with insufficient information. The problem of understanding life is beyond mere humans.

1:18 Instead of answering all our questions and bringing happiness, great learning or wisdom only leads to less certainty and more pain.¹

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14

12:9 This verse is consistent with the view that Solomon was the author of Ecclesiastes (1Kg 4:30–32).

12:10 This verse indicates that the Teacher not only sought to give sound teaching, but to present it in a way that was appealing and appropriate. This suggests that there is more care in the wording and arrangement of books such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes than first meets the eye.

12:11 The essential teaching of this verse—that God has given us wisdom in order to guide us through life—is clear. A pastoral metaphor governs at least part of the verse. God (the one Shepherd) prods us along just as shepherds prod animals with cattle prods—sticks with sharp points (Ac 26:14). It is not certain whether embedded nails refers to nails inserted at the ends of cattle prods (1Sm 13:21), or whether this is a different metaphor, describing proverbs as fixed and dependable, like nails driven in a wall. If the latter, it implies that we can hang our lives on these fixed truths.

12:12 Proverbs are important, but the Teacher warns against study done for its own sake. Too much study deprives a person of the joys that Ecclesiastes recommends. This verse does not oppose scholarship, but it does demand that scholars approach their work with humility and with balance in their lives.

12:13–14 The meaning of the phrase because this is for all humanity is much debated. The Hebrew literally says, “for this [is] the whole of man.” The phrase could mean, as the CSB renders it, that the rule to fear God applies to every person. Alternatively, it could mean obedience to God is the proper role for man in the universe. In other words, to live in the fear of God is to be truly human. To do otherwise is to lose the essence of our humanity. The conclusion of Ecclesiastes, to fear God, is in keeping with the message of the book—that we are mortal and weak but he is almighty. Although the book recommends, among other things, that we should enjoy our brief time under the sun, the advice to fear God trumps everything. The whole of the book has been focused on the brevity of earthly life and on how we should live in light of this reality. But at the end, the book looks beyond this life to the final judgment.²

References

1. Duane A. Garrett, “Ecclesiastes,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1006–1007.
2. Garrett, 1018.