

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?

(Part 1)

CHAPTER 13

“What is the meaning of life and can the answer be found in the Christian religion?”

I would like to address this question by looking at one of the books in the Old Testament, the book of Ecclesiastes.

Ravi Zacharias was once speaking to a large crowd of college students and one student interrupted his presentation, stood up and yelled out, *“Everything is meaningless!”*

The speaker responded very quickly, *“You don’t believe that.”*

The student yelled, *“Yes, I do!”*

The speaker said, *“No, you don’t.”*

The student yelled, *“I most certainly do. Who are you to tell me I don’t?”*

“Then repeat your statement for me,” the speaker requested.

“Everything is meaningless!”

Dr. Zacharias then said to him, *“I assume that you assume that your statement is meaningful.”*

The student said, *“Pardon?”*

The speaker said, *“If your statement is meaningful, then everything is not meaningless. On the other hand, if everything is meaningless, then what you have just said is meaningless too. So, in effect, you have said nothing.”ⁱ*

The interesting thing is that this student’s statement is identical with the first verse of the book of Ecclesiastes.

“The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: ‘Meaningless, meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’” (Ecclesiastes 1:1-2)

That’s a real “pick me up” verse, isn’t it?

At times, this book sounds incredibly pessimistic and depressing. However, if you read this book carefully you will see that the author has the answer to the question, **“What is the meaning of life?”** He has the answer, but first he will discuss all the things that *we think* will bring meaning and joy to our lives.

Ecclesiastes is a book about experimentation. It is about a man who is reflecting on his lifelong quest for meaning. The teacher, the author of Ecclesiastes, an old man now, looks back over the years of his life and basically says... *“been there, done that.”* He has experimented and tasted everything life has to offer.

Money: The writer says, *“I’ve had more than you can dream.”*

Wisdom and education: *“My wisdom was world renowned.”*

Fame and Power: *“More than anyone before me.”*

Fun: *“I’ve done it all.”*

Accomplishments: *“Ditto.”*

Relationships: *“I’ve had more relationships than you can possibly imagine.”*

He has experienced all these things that we think are supposed to bring meaning and happiness. Here is his report in a nutshell...It’s empty. It’s all meaningless.

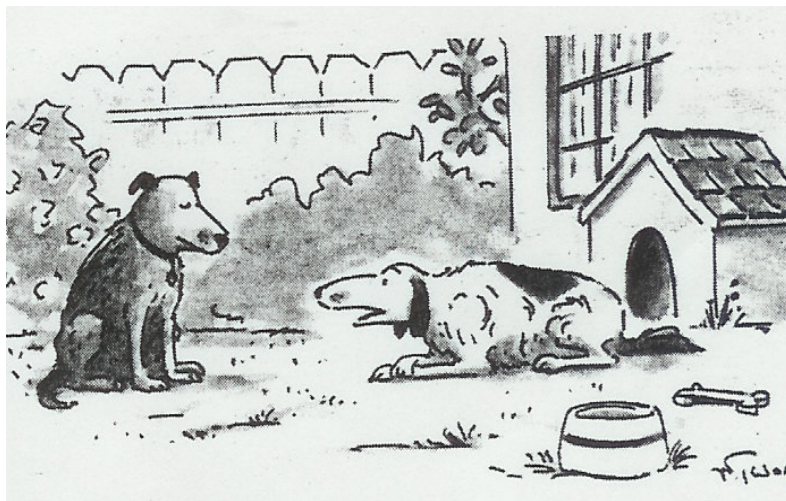
He’s not saying that these things are unimportant, but that all these things, especially in abundance, will ultimately leave you empty.

The Irish writer, Oscar Wilde once said, *“In this world there are two great tragedies: One is not getting what you want, and the other is getting it.”*ⁱⁱ

Most people are desperately searching for meaning, peace and joy, but are trying to find these things in the wrong places.

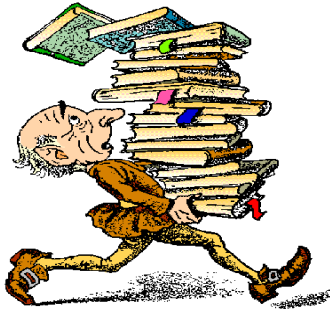
Before we look at what the author of Ecclesiastes says about the meaning of life, let’s look at the question,

“What does not bring meaning, peace and joy to life?”



“I’ve got the bowl, the bone, the big yard. I know I should be happy.”

"I would be happy if I were more educated!"



Many people throughout history have felt that knowledge is the key to a meaningful, peaceful and joyful life.

What about education, wisdom and knowledge?

Most believe that the book of Ecclesiastes was written by or at least about King Solomon of Israel.

Let's look for a moment at how wise, educated and smart King Solomon was according to the Bible:

"God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man..." (1 Kings 4:29-31)

"Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard his wisdom." (1 Kings 4:34) (See also 1 Kings 10:4-8)

What does he say about education and wisdom?

Look at Ecclesiastes 1:12-13:

"I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven."

Yeah, Teacher what did you find out? Surely knowledge, the wisdom of the ages and the wonders of science hold the key to meaning and true happiness!

"I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind." (Ecclesiastes 1:14)

"For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."
(Ecclesiastes 1:18)

Albert Einstein, two days before his death, said something very similar –

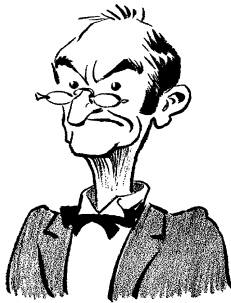
"Those of us who know the most are gloomiest about the future."ⁱⁱⁱ

So, the writer here is the smartest of the smart. He has reached the pinnacle of education. His report on the matter is this – Meaning, Peace and Joy can't be found there.

The message here is not that education and knowledge are unimportant. He affirms this in chapter 2:13... *"I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness."*

Education is vital. He would affirm this. The message here is that wisdom, education and knowledge do not bring life.

"What about pleasure and fun? Will these things bring me joy and meaning?"



What about Pleasure and Fun?

Surely, pleasure and fun bring happiness!

There are two types of fun – sinful fun and fun that isn't sinful.

The author of Ecclesiastes would say that both are ultimately empty. Sinful fun leaves you empty, lost and feeling guilty. Just plain old fun...well, it still leaves you empty eventually.

Proverbs 25:16 is an interesting verse ... *"If you find honey, eat just enough - too much of it, and you will vomit."*

In other words, even good things, in abundance, will eventually make you sick.

Ravi Zacharias put it this way... “Any pleasure, however good, if not kept in balance, will distort reality and destroy appetite.”^{iv}



What does the author of Ecclesiastes say about fun?

Look at Ecclesiastes 2:10: “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.”

Can you imagine? Anything he saw that he wanted, he took. Anything he wanted to do, he did.

“I thought in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.’ But that also proved to be meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 2:1)

The truth is that pleasure is temporary and short lived. The writer of Hebrews commends Moses for his faith by saying:

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.” (Hebrews 11:24-26)

Moses could have had everything Egypt had to offer, but he followed God rather than pleasure because he knew it was short lived and it could not ultimately provide life, meaning, peace or joy.

Ravi Zacharias says something that we here in this wealthy nation should take special note of:

“I am absolutely convinced that meaninglessness does not come from being weary of pain; meaninglessness comes from being weary of pleasure.”^v

This is exactly the conclusion in Ecclesiastes.

“I would be happy, if I were rich!”



What about money, wealth, riches, and power?

Let's look briefly at just how rich Solomon was.

“The weight of the gold that Solomon received yearly was 666 talents (25 tons) not including the revenues from merchants and traders and from all the Arabian kings and the governors of the land.” (1 Kings 10:14-15)

“King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth.” (1 Kings 10:23)

Again, the writer of Ecclesiastes has gone farther down the road of wealth than anyone before him. Here is his report...

“Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 5:10)

Someone once asked John D. Rockefeller, the richest man of his time, “How much money is enough?” He replied with a perfect definition of greed: “Just a little more.” A real estate tycoon said something similar: “I don't want all the land in the world, just whatever touches mine.”^{vi}

Consider the following story about Howard Hughes:

“At age 45, Hughes was one of the most glamorous men in America. He courted actresses, piloted exotic test aircraft, and worked on top-secret CIA contracts. He owned a string of hotels around the world, even an airline – TWA – to carry him on global jaunts.

Twenty years later, at age 65, Howard Hughes still had plenty of money - \$2.3 billion to be exact. But the world’s richest man had become one of its most pathetic. He lived in small dark rooms atop his hotels. Without sun and without joy. He was unkempt: a scraggly beard had grown waist-length, his hair fell down his back, his fingernails were two inches long. His once-powerful 6’4” frame had shrunk to about 100 pounds. This famous and powerful man spent most of his time watching movies over and over, with the same movie showing as many as 150 times. He lay naked in bed, deathly afraid of germs. Life held no meaning for him. Finally, emaciated and hooked on drugs, he died at age 67, for a lack of a medical device his own company had helped to develop.”^{vii}

A Chinese billionaire who converted to Christianity was asked “Why did you convert?” This was his answer --- “All my life I have spent my time climbing the mountain of wealth and success and when I finally got to the top...I looked around and nothing was there.”

Jesus once said, “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26)

Money and riches cannot bring life, meaning, peace or even security.

Laurence Shames was right when he made this observation about the United State’s myth that more is better...

“Consumption kept the workers working, which kept the paychecks coming, which kept the people spending, which kept inventors inventing and investors investing, which meant there was more to consume...It was a perfect circle, complete in itself –but empty in the middle.”^{viii}

What about fame, success or reaching the top of your game?

Boris Becker stunned the world after winning his second Wimbledon when a reporter asked, “How does it feel?” He answered, “I still battle daily with the decision of whether or not to commit suicide.”^{ix}

During his interview with Diane Sawyer on ABC’s “Primetime Live,” Mel Gibson discussed the reasons he turned back to God and initially began meditating on the Passion of the Christ. “Let’s face it,” said Gibson, “I have been to the pinnacle of what secular utopia has to offer. I got money, fame, this, that and the other... It wasn’t enough. It’s not good enough. It leaves you empty. The more you eat, the emptier you get.”^x

“What people fail to realize is that all achievements are eventually surpassed, records are broken, reputations fade, and tributes are forgotten. In college, James Dobson’s goal was to become the school’s tennis champion. He felt proud when his trophy was prominently placed in the school’s trophy cabinet. Years later, someone mailed him that trophy. They had found it in a trash can when the school was remodeled. Jim said, ‘Given enough time, all trophies will be trashed by someone else!’”^{xvi}

What about your career? Work? Accomplishments?

The writer of Ecclesiastes became a work-a-holic...

“I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.” (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6)

...but then he became bitterly disappointed...

“So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I hated all the things I toiled for under the sun...” (Ecclesiastes 2:17-18)

“...I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man’s envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” (Ecclesiastes 4:4)

What about relationships?

Look at 1 Kings 11:1-3...

*“King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women ... Solomon held fast to them in love. **He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.**”*

Many young people say things like this... *“I would happy, if I could only find someone to date or marry.” “If I could only be in a good relationship...then I would be complete.”*

Of course, there is some truth to this. Even God said *“It is not good for the man to be alone.” (Genesis 2:18)*

Relationships are so important and great but they will not and they can not make an incomplete person complete.

NOTES

ⁱ Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1994), 184.

ⁱⁱ Philip Yancey (General Editor), *The Student Bible – The New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 722.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1994), 54.

^{iv} Ravi Zacharias, *Cries of the Heart* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 140.

^v Ravi Zacharias, *Is There Meaning in Evil and Suffering?* (Video: Faith and Science Lecture Forum, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, 1999).

^{vi} Philip Yancey (General Editor), *The Student Bible – The New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 728.

^{vii} Philip Yancey (General Editor), *The Student Bible – The New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 723.

^{viii} Laurence Shames, *The Hunger for More* (New York: Times Books, 1989).

^{ix} Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1994), 56. Taken from Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 15.

^x Taken from Diane Sawyer's interview with Mel Gibson on ABC's "Primetime Live" which aired on February 16th, 2004.

^{xi} Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 33.