

Family Bible Series for July 30: Pleasing God begins with desiring to obey him

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Explore the Bible Series for July 30

The meaning of life cannot be found in pursuits

- Ecclesiastes 4:1-6:12

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What is the meaning of life? Does life, in fact, have any meaning at all?

These philosophical questions have been posed by thinkers for thousands of years, and they still continue to evoke discussion. The modern world is characterized by rapid change, technological advancement and scientific discovery, yet people remain more or less the same as their ancestors in previous generations.

In the midst of a rapidly evolving world, it may be harder today than at any time in the past for people to find any real meaning in their own lives. Our personal accomplishments seem to dwindle into insignificance in the face of world events, which are hurtling forward with breakneck speed. In such a world, can an individual human being find meaning?

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In Samuel Becket's play "Waiting for Godot," two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, struggle with the question of life's meaning. The two are unsure if life really has meaning, but they are determined to act as though it did. Vladimir says to his companion: "Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us!"

In a world full of uncertainty, the preacher likewise seeks meaning in life. He has already discussed and dismissed the possibilities that meaning can be found in pleasure, wisdom and work, so now he looks elsewhere.

Ecclesiastes 4:1-8

Perhaps, the preacher says, striving for justice is an activity that will bring meaning to life. In this respect, he treads close to the topic of the book of Job, which examines the nature of God's justice. Like the author of Job, the preacher is not encouraged by his observations of the world around him. Contrary to his expectations that oppressors should be punished and the

oppressed relieved, he sees just the opposite. Those who have power are the oppressors rather than the oppressed, so justice is rarely achieved. In any case, the search for justice cannot provide ultimate meaning in life.

Ecclesiastes 5:13-6:9

Since the search for justice focuses on the needs of others, and the preacher has concluded that path leads nowhere, maybe, he says, a person should focus on his own needs and forget others since he can have no ultimate control over how other people act.

With this idea in mind, he turns to the pursuit of riches. Since the pursuit of riches largely is an individual pursuit, maybe he will have better luck finding meaning there.

Many people today believe the pursuit of riches is a meaningful activity, and many churches also promote its value, teaching that wealth is a sign of God's blessing and offering courses on attaining and managing wealth.

However, what the preacher discovered is not only do riches not provide meaning in life, they can be positively harmful to the person who has riches. The pursuit of wealth can rob people of the joy of life, for they are never satisfied with what they have. Like the other pursuits he has examined, the pursuit of riches proves to be ultimately meaningless.

Ecclesiastes 4:3; 6:3

According to the Talmud, the rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai debated the question of whether it would have been better for humanity not to have been created. After a debate that lasted two and a half years, the rabbis decided that it would indeed have been better for humanity not to

have been created.

Their decision accords with the conclusion of the preacher, who says not to have been born is preferable to actually being born, because of the vanity of the world we live in. The idea that those who never existed are better off than all those who have existed smacks of pessimism, and it tends toward nihilism, the idea that no values are absolute and therefore life is meaningless. However, it must be understood that this is only the preacher's provisional conclusion, not his final answer.

When life is spent in pursuit of ephemeral things like pleasure, riches and even justice, it is easy to come to the conclusion that life is a waste of time, without ultimate meaning. The solution to this perplexing situation is not to find another temporal pursuit in life (remember that the preacher assumes God's work in the world is ultimately unknowable, so it cannot be a valid pursuit) but rather to revisualize life itself. That is the task the preacher will undertake in the remainder of the book.

Discussion questions

- Do you think life is more confusing now than in the past?
- Do rapid changes in technology inevitably improve life?
- Do you consider yourself a typical representative of the human race? Do your actions affect people outside your immediate sphere of influence?
- In what ways can wealth improve one's life? In what ways can it make one's life worse? Is the attainment of wealth a purely personal endeavor, or are other people inevitably affected, either for better or worse?
- What do you make of the Talmudic discussion about the question of the existence of human beings? Why might the rabbis have decided the world

would have been better if humans had never existed? Do you agree with their conclusion?



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