

Explore: Can I find meaning?

July 5, 2013

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for July 21 focuses on Ecclesiastes 1:1-4, 12-14; 2:1-3, 12-14, 24-26.*

This lesson begins a new unit covering the book of Ecclesiastes. A book of wisdom sayings, Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most skeptical book in the Bible. Because of this, Ecclesiastes is not read often by contemporary Christians. Instead, readers simply quote a few lines here and there, missing the main message of the whole book.

Like the book of Job, Ecclesiastes is concerned with the mystery of human existence, but it explores this topic in a much different manner. The author of Ecclesiastes is “the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). Many readers assume Solomon is the writer, although he is not mentioned by name, and the other titles could refer to someone else or be honorific altogether.

The Teacher

Because of this, scholars prefer to use the word for “Teacher,” Qoheleth, as the title of the book’s author. Nonetheless, whether one sees Solomon as the author is a minor issue that does not significantly affect interpretation of Ecclesiastes.

For generations, human beings have puzzled over the meaning of life, and these questions are not simply intellectual. That is, they involve our deepest sense of who we are as creatures in the universe and individuals in relation with others. In our contemporary context, these questions are played out in several arenas, including self-help books, music, film and scientific study.

Because concern for our purpose always is in the back of our mind, we

immediately empathize with Qoheleth when he states at the beginning of the book, “Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (v. 2). Later, he will add one more clause—“a chasing after the wind” (1:14; 2:11), which gives us a mental picture of a genuinely futile effort to grasp the ungraspable. This statement, which is the theme for the entire book, tells us questions about life’s purpose and the meaning of existence affect everyone equally, even ancient writers within Scripture.

Trying several paths

Qoheleth does not simply declare everything to be meaningless. Rather, he follows an empirical method, trying out several paths of life to see if one leads to a deeper meaning of life. He begins by embracing wisdom, or knowledge, for living well. After pursuing this life of study and following God’s ways, he observes those who are foolish, discerning no difference between them: “I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind” (v. 17).

Next, Qoheleth pursues pleasure, that is, anything that makes life enjoyable, specifically laughter (2:2) and wine (2:3). He also finds them to be lacking, so he broadens his investigation into pleasure to include financial success. He acquires wealth, property, building projects and businesses, stating, “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure” (v. 10).

Certainly this is hard work dedicated to achieve greater possessions or status. Once again, though, the final judgment is the same: “Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (v. 11).

Part of Qoheleth’s examination involves measuring whether a particular aspect of life provides some benefit, the ultimate gain being escape from death. Yet his observations reveal wisdom does not change one’s

fate—everyone dies (vv. 12-16). This leads him to conclude even work is meaningless because the fruits of that labor would eventually be passed on to someone who may squander them.

This too is meaningless

Surely this is a sentiment many people even today feel: “What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless” (vv. 22-23).

Qoheleth’s ultimate conclusion from his tests is one should “eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil” (v. 24). In other words, while his quests for pleasure involved pursuing what he gained from work, he has realized there is joy in work itself. These simple and everyday activities—eating, drinking, working—highlight the fact that genuine meaning and happiness in life is not centered in the extraordinary aspects of life. Instead, the ordinary aspects of life, those often taken for granted, are the focus.