

# **LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for January 3: Wrestling with the meaning of life**

December 27, 2009

Does life have meaning? Is all our striving nothing more than absolute, total futility? Does life involve no real meaning or reward? These are the questions faced by Qoheleth (Hebrew word for Teacher or Preacher). The Teacher (Qoheleth) will ask the burning questions about the meaning or meaninglessness of life and come to the conclusion that relationship with the eternal God brings significance to what often seems without meaning.

A young man, a member of a church I once served, was facing many problems. Financial, career, family and service problems pressed upon him. He recognized gifts that would have allowed him tremendous accomplishments but also acknowledged circumstances that blocked his path. He said "Life is absolutely terrible, and then you die." His questions reflected those of Qoheleth.

Ecclesiastes has the characteristics of wisdom literature like Proverbs and Job. The book is, however, most often placed with the Five Scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther). These books are much different from each other but each was read at a particular festival of the Jews. Ecclesiastes was read at the Festival of Booths or tabernacles (Sukkot) which was held in the fall, six months after Passover. It marked the grape harvest and commemorated the Hebrew's wilderness travels.

In this lesson, we listen as Qoheleth wrestles with the question about the meaning of life.

**Life seems to have no meaning (Ecclesiastes 1:1-7)**

The author of Ecclesiastes most likely was Solomon. The term "*Qoheleth*" meant literally one who convenes an assembly but in this book indicated one who possessed a measure of wisdom. Solomon possessed wisdom but lost much of the value of it by his tragic drift from God. Ecclesiastes reveals the questioning of one who had come to doubt any real meaning in life.

The Teacher declared everything "Absolute futility" (v. 2). The term "*hebel*" basically means "vapor, breath or emptiness." Usual translations include futile, vanity and meaningless. The word reminds us that life is transient, will come to an end, and nothing that humans can do can actually change the process. People engage in physical work from which they expect gain or profit but realize little success. The sun rises and sets. The wind blows. The rivers continue their course toward the sea but the oceans are never full. People exist for a brief period on earth but the great events of life move with little change.

Persons without God would see life as a continuous and unending cycle. Life is brief. The cycles of life continue without any influence from these brief existences. The Teacher will finally realize that God can give meaning to what seems to human vision absolute futility.

### **Life gets tedious (Ecclesiastes 1:8-11)**

The problems of life often wear a person down. Life's continued grind and its problems are devastating for many. Problems continue and those one thought to have solved arise again. Zest or happiness can easily be lost in the continuing grinding of life.

"All things" reveals the Teacher's cynical conclusion that nothing in the world could bring happiness or peace. So great is the problem that it is more than any person can describe ("say"). Eyes observe what has been from eternity; ears hear what has sounded before. Nothing new exists; all has previously happened. Nothing will change what will come.

Life does wear people down. The continuing problems and lack of solutions grind one as flowing water polish the rocks in the river or blowing sand chips away the mountains. The Teacher laments the continued pain of living in such a world. Christians face this continuing pain of unceasing problems of life and sometimes doubt any possibility of change or any improvement of conditions.

### **An answer does exist (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)**

The Teacher does not leave us in despair. He searched for meaning not in limited human wisdom, worldly wealth, passing pleasure, meaningless power, vanishing fame or questionable security. He may have been quoting and refuting conventional wisdom of his day (and ours) that seeks real happiness from human sources and despairs of finding it. Qoheleth declares that when all is said, the conclusion is that meaninglessness can be overthrown by “fearing God” and “keeping” his commandments.

The Teacher concludes this answer is the “whole duty” of man (KJV), the “whole of man” (NIV), or “for all humanity” (HCSB). The idea is every person should be able to comprehend the purpose of God in life and find in that purpose fulfillment regardless of the grinding nature of events and seemingly meaningless experiences of life.

God will show the value of every action (“bring every act to judgment”). What seems meaningless will be revealed in accordance with his will and plan for the world and for the individual life. Good and evil will be made known. God will show those who profit from evil are evil. God will reveal as good the good acts. What may have seemed meaningless will be revealed as God’s using people and events to achieve his will.

Life is not meaningless. God uses difficult and seemingly insignificant events to bring better life to many. In God, what seems meaningless becomes significant. The Teacher encourages all who suffer in a cruel and

demanding world and wonder if the struggle is worth it. The answer is profoundly, life is real and the grave is not its goal.