

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA August 4, 2013

Ecclesiastes 1:2 and 2:18-26

Always Remember What Life is About!

- 1. You can't take it with you**
- 2. It can't give you peace on earth**
- 3. Only God can give you meaning in life**

Hymns: *This is My Father's World* – 411

Distribution: 477 – 313

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All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Ecclesiastes 1:2 and 2:18-26 –The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless”...

I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. ²⁰ So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. ²¹ For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. ²² What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? ²³ All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

²⁴ A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, ²⁵ for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? ²⁶ To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

If you asked smart people what life is about, what kind of answers do you think you would get? Here is what some people have said about the meaning of life:

- “Life is short; live it up.” (Nikita Krushchev)
- “Being on a tightrope is living; everything else is waiting.” (Karl Wallenda)
- “Life is one long process of getting tired.” (Samuel Butler)
- “To live is to function. That is all there is in living.” (Oliver Wendell Holmes)
- “Life is a dead-end street.” (H.L. Mencken)
- “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance.” (Jean-Paul Sartre)
- “Life is a video game. No matter how good you get, you always get zapped in the end.” (unknown)

It's a good thing that the Scriptures tell us the truth about life. The world sure needs its guidance!

Today, we will see rock solid guidance on the meaning of life from God himself as he speaks to us from the book of Ecclesiastes. As we explore this topic today, may God help us remember these lessons!

1. You can't take it with you

As we begin today, let's set the context of these verses. Ecclesiastes is a very unique book. It was written by King Solomon, the “son of David, king in Jerusalem,” as he calls himself at the beginning of the book. The whole book has a rather negative tone toward life and the world. It seems to be written by someone who is approaching the end of their life, and is despairing of the fleeting nature of it all.

Solomon, you might remember, had it all, as far as what many people look for in life! God blessed him with great wisdom like no one else had. He had tremendous wealth, both from his father, King David, and from his own enterprises. He had, unfortunately, a great number of wives and a personal harem. He had world-wide fame and power. In a worldly-centered way, he had it all! But as he comes to the end of his life, he writes about what life is all about.

We read, *“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless”... I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. ¹⁹And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless.”* Solomon thought about what would happen to all that he had worked for after he was gone. The Bible tells us about Solomon’s heir. His name was Rehoboam. Perhaps as Solomon thought about passing his possessions and power on to Rehoboam he remembered his own foolishness in following his own father, David. Perhaps Solomon remembered how, after his throne was established and he built the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, he allowed his own interests to be drawn away by the women and the pleasures of the world. He had many foreign wives, the Bible tells us, and he built an altar to each of their gods along with the altar to the Lord on a hill outside of Jerusalem. The Lord became very angry with Solomon.

Would Rehoboam exhibit wisdom with all that he was going to inherit from his father Solomon? We know the rest of the story from the pages of Scripture. 1 Kings 12 tells us that when Rehoboam received his father’s throne he had two words of advice coming from his new advisors. The older advisers told him to announce to the people that he would be a servant to them with a servant’s spirit. The younger advisers told him to be a hard guy and tell the people that he would dominate them and rule over them with an iron fist. Rehoboam followed the advice of the younger advisers and proclaimed, *“My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.”* (1 Kings 12:14) When he announced this to the people, ten of the twelve tribes rebelled against him and followed another man who had been an enemy of King Solomon during his lifetime. Israel would never

again be a unified country but would be split in a divided kingdom.

Solomon is obviously depressed as he thinks about leaving his kingdom to another. It seemed futile to work for possessions. Who knows what would happen to everything that he would leave behind?

It’s still true today, isn’t it? You are probably familiar with the painting of the Last Supper by Leonardo Da Vinci. Do you know what happened to it? He painted this on the wall of a building. Da Vinci worked on it for at least ten years. It is said that he often spent whole days so absorbed in it that he forgot to eat. Then for days he would only come and stand in front of it with folded arms, as if criticizing it. Sometimes he would hurry to it during the day and add a touch or two to the picture and leave. Unfortunately, he mixed his colors with oil – a fatal innovation – so in the course of a few hundred years it has been repaired three times. Monks in charge of the building allowed the lower part of the center to be destroyed to make a door in the wall; and Napoleon’s men later not only made the room a stable, but amused themselves by throwing bricks at the apostles. It is now a ruin, and the only way we can form an idea of its beauty is to see the copy made by one of his pupils that is now in the Royal Academy in London.

What will happen to all that you are working so hard for? It will not go along with you. You never saw a hearse pulling a U-Haul. Who will get your treasures that you have labored for, paid for, and maintained? Who will get your money? Your savings account or investments? Your house? Your cars? Don’t put the focus of your life on these. They will go to another! They may even go to people who will fight and bicker over who gets what of yours. **May God help us keep a clear perspective on this!**

2. It can’t give you peace on earth

Solomon despairs over another truth in these verses. He also wrote, *“What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is grief and pain; even at night his mind*

does not rest. This too is meaningless.” Is this the way you think Solomon would originally have envisioned his life? It doesn’t sound as though he had much happiness from all he had! He had all the things that people would ask for today if they had the imaginary magic lamp in their hands and a genie popped out and said he would fulfill three wishes. You know what the people of the world would do for their wishes: Money, leisure, travel, rich food, beautiful women, expensive luxuries, talents to get ahead in the world. Remember, Solomon had all of these!

What does he say these things and the work that brought these things resulted in?

- PAIN
- GRIEF
- MEANINGLESSNESS
- SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

The process of working for these things did not bring him happiness in life!

The world has found out that Solomon was indeed a prophet. Listen to what others have said on this same thought:

- Shakespeare (Macbeth) – “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time. And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot. Full of sound and fury, SIGNIFYING NOTHING.”
- Napoleon – “I am doing now what will fill thousands of volumes in the generation; in the next, one volume will contain it all; in the third, a paragraph; in the fourth, a single line.” (How much do you exactly know about Napoleon’s legacy?)
- Mark Twain – “Men labor and sweat and struggle... They squabble and scold and fight. Age creeps upon them; infirmities follow... It (the release from life) comes at last – the only

unpoisoned gift earth ever had for them – and they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence... A world which will lament them a day and forget them forever.”

What can all the things life has to offer never give? They cannot give you peace of mind while you’re living.

Perhaps you have experienced this? Does your work or routine leave you wondering what the use is? You get up, you wash your face, you put on clothes, you feed your body, you do your chores, you come home, you feed your body, you wash your face, and you go to bed to do it all over again. The same routine, the same rut.

The same can be said of an occupation. The day may come when the restaurant worker realizes that all he does is feed people’s bodies who get hungry in a matter of hours and who won’t be around forever anyway, and who will remember what his contribution has been to the world? The paper mill worker may see that the paper towel and tissues that he produces will wipe up spills or noses and be thrown away, and who will remember his great talents and contributions in the world? The weatherman may recognize that he can stay up all night tracking storms, but who will care in ONE DAY when there is new weather? Who will watch his recorded broadcasts from five years ago? You can fill in your own occupation in the blank and have days where you wonder the same questions.

3. Only God can give you meaning in life

This has become a real downer of a message today, hasn’t it? You may wonder why you came to church to hear this at all. Thank goodness our reading goes on and puts a meaningful spin on life! Solomon wrote, “*A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness.*”

Where does meaning in this life start? Solomon says it well: *“Without God, who can eat or find enjoyment?”* The beginning to a meaningful life is to recognize who your God is and what he has made you. Realize that you are nothing by yourself, but God has done wonderful things for you:

- *John 1:12 – To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*
- *Romans 5:8 – God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*
- *Colossians 1:14 –In him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

You have been loved by God so much that he sent his Son Jesus to take away all your sins by his death and resurrection! You have been freed from your debt of sin. You have been eternally saved because the Savior, Jesus Christ, has come to win your salvation by his death on the cross and his triumphant resurrection. You are his! This is where the meaning of life starts.

You have meaning in another way also. This is found in passages such as:

- *John 15:16 – You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.*
- *Matthew 5:16 – Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*
- *Ephesians 2:10 – We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*
- *1 Corinthians 10:31 – Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*

We are privileged by the Lord to serve him with our life of love and to be his spokesmen in the world. We serve him directly in his work on earth and in our individual corners of the world as we live our Christian lives!

When we realize these truths, then along with Solomon we realize the role of eating, drinking, and working. We can eat and drink

and find satisfaction in work, because God has given us the proper perspective of them. They are not the goal or the important part of our existence. They are secondary to the salvation God has brought about for us and the service he gives us to do as his people in the world.

When we realize this, our attitude in life can be summed up in many words:

- Peace of mind
- Contentment
- Appreciation
- Satisfaction
- Purpose
- Witnessing

What an advantage you have over many in our world. There are many who despair of the seeming insignificance of their existence. There are also many who truly wonder, “How would Jesus be relevant for my life today?” You know the answers. How rich you are!

As we close our thoughts today, we need to ask ourselves, will we remember? There are many people here today who are from different age groups. Solomon seemed to have learned this toward the end of his life. It took quite a while for him to grasp this. Can you learn now? Can you be positive about the parts of your life that seem mundane and meaningless? Can you remember whom you are living for each day?

Yes, by the power of the Holy Spirit!

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May God help us to learn the lessons!
Amen.