

When Life is Meaningless

7.26.26

Message 4

Ecclesiastes 4 (CSB)

4 Again, I observed all the acts of oppression being done under the sun. Look at the tears of those who are oppressed; they have no one to comfort them. Power is with those who oppress them; they have no one to comfort them. ² So I commended the dead, who have already died, more than the living, who are still alive. ³ But better than either of them is the one who has not yet existed, who has not seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

THE LONELINESS OF WEALTH

⁴ I saw that all labor and all skillful work is due to one person's jealousy of another. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

⁵ The fool folds his arms

and consumes his own flesh.

⁶ Better one handful with rest

than two handfuls with effort and a pursuit of the wind.

⁷ Again, I saw futility under the sun: ⁸ There is a person without a companion, without even a son or brother, and though there is no end to all his struggles, his eyes are still not content with riches. "Who am I struggling for," he asks, "and depriving myself of good things?" This too is futile and a miserable task.

⁹ Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. ¹⁰ For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. ¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? ¹² And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken.

¹³ Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer pays attention to warnings. ¹⁴ For he came from prison to be king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom.

¹⁵ I saw all the living, who move about under the sun, follow a second youth who succeeds him.

¹⁶ There is no limit to all the people who were before them, yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

Motivating the Meaningless

A. Have you ever wanted to yell at someone?

1. I confess, I fight this temptation more than I should.
2. There are reasons to yell:
 - a. A kid walks out into the street with traffic.
 - b. Your dog poops on the carpet.
 - c. The person in the drive-through pulls up to the board, says, “Just a minute,” and takes 15 to decide what they want.
 - d. Slow traffic in the left lane of a four-lane highway.

B. Reading Ecclesiastes makes me want to yell at the writer.

1. It’s like watching Wheel of Fortune: you’re yelling the answer at the TV, SOLVE THE PUZZLE!
2. You’re trying to motivate a show that was recorded months or years ago.
3. You know the answer. You see the answer. And the contestant DOESN’T See it.
4. I read Ecclesiastes, and I see the answer! But the writer doesn’t.
5. So he spirals, in front of us, saying things that aren’t wrong, but they are incomplete.

C. Have you ever watched someone spiral?

1. Spiral into addictive behaviors
2. Spiral into hopelessness
3. Have you ever watched a person make one bad decision after another, and before you know it, they feel too far gone?
4. Sometimes people simply give up.
 - a. They become cynical.
 - b. They no longer care about anyone or anything.

D. Even the most optimistic people are capable of a cynical, jaded life.

1. More money won’t fix it.

2. A hot spouse won't fix it.
3. A new car or toy.
4. There is nothing that has been created that can give us meaning.
5. Apart from Jesus, everything is never enough.

Solomon tells us of the dangers of a meaningless life.

As we think through these 3 areas, can I encourage you to do two things?

First, ask "Is this me? Am I struggling with this?"

Second, ask "Are there people in my life that sound like this?"

This first one hurts.

When life is meaningless, we are better off dead. 1-3

A. The writer observes the injustice in the world, the unfairness, the struggle.

1. Instead of doing something about it (he's the king, so he could fix some of it), he shrugs his shoulders
2. In fact, Solomon adds to the injustice later in life. He contributes to the problem not the solution.

B. So what does the wisest man do about it?

1. Nothing.
2. In fact, he says it's better to be dead than alive, and better to have never been born than to have ever lived.
3. There is a line in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.
 - a. Scrooge is confronted with people who would rather die than go to debtors' prison or poor houses. He responds like Solomon:
 - b. "If they would rather die, then let them and decrease the surplus population."
 - c. Sounds like the world we live in today.

C. Solomon isn't the only person in the Bible who says this.

1. Most of the prophets have some kind of moment where they wish they could die.

2. But they eventually are confronted by God and repent and move on.

3. Solomon doesn't.

a. He has seen it all.

b. And it's all meaningless.

D. Solomon concludes: Since we are all living lives that don't matter, we might as well not even be alive.

1. These are honest words.

2. And they hurt.

3. To look at life and come to the conclusion that my family or I would be better off if I were dead, that is heavy.

Can we sit with this?

When life is meaningless, work is meaningless. Vs. 4-8

A. Two motivators of humanity apart from God:

1. Competition (rooted in jealousy and envy) VS 4

2. Laziness (rooted in selfishness and personal pleasure). Vs. 5-6

B. When our lives aren't lived for God's glory, then jealousy and envy are strong motivators.

1. We used to call this "keeping up with the Joneses."

2. The younger generations don't compare themselves with their neighbor so much as they compare to influencers on social media.

3. If we were really honest, competition, jealousy, envy, and pride motivate a lot of what we do.

4. We can love Jesus and still be motivated by jealousy.

C. selfishness and personal pleasure are strong motivators.

1. A lot of our world and community is motivated by their own comfort.

2. To ensure their flesh is satisfied.

3. We live selfishly, pridefully, and Scripture calls it foolish.

D. The New Testament offers a different way.

Colossians 3:23–24 ²³ Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people, ²⁴ knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ.

1. For Christians, our work doesn't give us meaning.
2. Jesus gives us meaning, thus our work becomes worship.
3. This includes everything:
 - a. Raising your kids.
 - b. Clocking into a job you hate.
 - c. Washing the same dishes for the 10,000th time.
4. When our lives are lived for Jesus and with eternity in view, then everything we do can be done for the Lord.
 - a. Otherwise, Solomon is right.
 - b. Jealousy and laziness guide our lives.
 - c. Then our comfort is an appropriate reason for living.
5. But Jesus calls us all to a life of meaning and purpose.
 - a. And that meaning and purpose usually come with labels like service and sacrifice.
 - b. Blessings feel like work and responsibility.
 - c. Gifts must be stewarded.
 - d. Work is not the Curse; but work cannot give our lives meaning.

E. Work shouldn't give our lives meaning, but it should support meaning.

1. So many men fall apart when retirement comes.
2. So many women fall apart when the kids leave the house.
3. Our vocations are meaningful only when they are part of our worship of Jesus.
4. Apart from Him, it is all meaningless.

F. What is your honest motivation for the work you do?

1. Some of us work because we have to.
2. Some of us work out a sense of shame or guilt.
3. Some of us work because we want something to do.
4. But how many of us work as an act of worship?
5. Our work will never be an act of worship if we are not connected to Jesus.

G. In the 1600s there was a Frenchman that we know as Brother Lawrence.

1. Brother Lawrence joined a monastery, but because he wasn't educated, he wasn't a monk or clergy.
2. Yet he wanted to give his life to the service of the Lord.
3. So for his whole life, he worked primarily in the monastery's kitchen.
4. From that place, he wrote a book called "The Practice of the Presence of God."
5. His writings, from the nastiness of a medieval kitchen, challenge me.

Quotes:

"We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed."

— **Brother Lawrence**, [The Practice of the Presence of God](#)

The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen... I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament."

Let us think often that our only business in this life is to please God. Perhaps all besides is but folly and vanity. "

— **Brother Lawrence**

H. This uneducated man possessed more sense and wisdom than Solomon.

1. The difference?
2. Solomon explored wisdom under heaven and apart from God.
3. Lawrence explored God and found God's wisdom and presence everywhere.

When life is meaningless, relationships become practical rather than fruitful. Vs 9-16

⁹Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. ¹⁰For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. ¹¹Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? ¹²And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken.

A. Have you ever heard this passage at a wedding?

1. It's funny that we will hear Ecc. 3 at a funeral and Ecc 4 at a wedding.
2. But can I bust your bubble for a minute?
3. This has nothing to do with marriage or love.
4. Love and affection is nowhere to be found in this text.
5. Instead, Solomon had compared a lonely person with someone who has a partner on a journey.
6. The person who travels with someone can at least receive some benefits as opposed to the one who goes alone.
7. Marriage can provide that, but that isn't what Ecclesiastes has in view here.

B. Instead, Solomon has come to the conclusion that relationships are valuable.

1. Remember, value? Something is valuable because it gives us something we want or need.
2. Value is not meaning. Value is practical.
3. When life has no meaning, and work has no meaning, a person's relationships will have no meaning.

C. "What's in it for me" becomes the motivation behind relationships.

1. It's not what you know but who you know.
2. People become things we use, not people to love.

D. What about the third strand?

1. Those of us in the room believe that our lives are stronger when God is the third person in our marriage.
2. Throughout Scripture, we see the repetition of 3.
3. There is something satisfying about 3.
4. But Solomon does not have God in view here.
 - a. He is simply acknowledging a wisdom that his world already knew.
 - b. That if 1 is bad, 2 is good, then 3 is best.
 - c. We read God into this text, but Solomon is still missing it.

Ecclesiastes 4:12 (CSB) ¹² And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken.

E. When our relationship with God is messed up, our relationship with people will be too.

1. I have known people who loved Jesus and were jerks.
2. Our relationship with Jesus does not make us a people-person.
3. But if our relationship with Jesus is struggling, most likely our relationship with people will struggle too.
 - a. My relationship with my spouse is reflective of my relationship with Jesus.
 - b. Your relationship with your kids is intertwined with your relationship with Jesus.
 - c. I cannot hate people and be right with God at the same time.
4. What if the first part of repairing that broken relationship is to invest in your relationship with Jesus first?

I still want to yell

A. As a pastor, sometimes I want to yell out the obvious!

1. Don't do that!

Don't make that decision!

Don't buy that thing.

Don't date that person.

Don't be dumb!

2. I know shepherds guide and direct, and are overall pretty gentle toward the sheep.

a. But there are days when I wish it could be all fixed by a conversation, a cup of coffee, or a good chewing-out.

b. I wouldn't yell at you because I hate you, but because I love you.

c. But I also know that isn't what fixes us.

d. That isn't what motivates us.

e. That isn't what changes us.

B. Only Jesus can change us.

1. He changes us as we give our lives to Jesus, not piece by piece, but the whole thing, all to Him.

2. That's what changes us.

a. We give him our sin, and our dreams.

b. Our life and the lives of those we love.

c. Our work and our hobbies.

d. We give all of ourselves to Jesus.

3. That means we serve God no matter the station: Even if it means washing dishes in a monastery.

4. That means that I fight the temptation to pursue my own gain and comfort, to view people as someone to love and not use, and to see that my life ALWAYS has meaning because Jesus loves me.

C. I asked you to think about this message for yourself and for someone else.

1. Maybe you have been thinking about what this world would be without you.

2. Or you have a friend who is living that right now.

3. Maybe your work has lost all meaning: You don't know why you are here.

4. Maybe your relationships are nothing more than business transactions.

- a. You have something they want.
- b. They have something you want or need.
- c. Nothing more than that.

If you were honest...

A. If you were honest, what would you say to God?

- 1. That's what this moment is about.
- 2. I want to give us a few minutes to be honest about God.
- 3. Honest about ourselves.
- 4. Honest about someone we care for.

B. Altars are a place of honesty.

- 1. Invite you to pray.