

The Search for Meaning *The Book of Ecclesiastes*

Futility in Work and Wisdom *Ecclesiastes 1:1 - 2:26*

Introduction: Can We Find Meaning in Circularity?

We're going to talk about our search for meaning in life. You can also call it our search for significance. I'd like to introduce this material with a story about a young woman who used to work for me in 1997. She was looking for job satisfaction and felt like she was running around in circles. She's a very idealistic electrical engineer who graduated from USC. But, she thought EE was too slow for her tastes, so she switched into software coding. That was her third job at Intel in 18 months. Doing CS had more instant gratification because she could write a program and get results back instantly. Unfortunately though, she still got disenchanted with certain things: She had to write weekly reports that she thought had no purpose; she had to attend meetings that seemed to be a waste of time and served no purpose. Every week there was a routine. Not only that, but she got frustrated by the politics in our department. And the worst part for her was she didn't know how she really made a difference. So in July, she decided to leave, and she asked me if I could be a reference for her. She took a job with a new company in Austin, Texas doing Java programming. Well, just two weeks ago, on September 2, I got a phone call from her. She had quit the job in Texas and had come back to Silicon Valley. She was wondering if I could be a reference. It seemed like her life followed a circular path. She was looking for significance, for meaning, but was always getting disappointed. I thought to myself, "What would I tell her, if I could share everything that was on my heart?" What would you tell her? To keep looking for that ideal job? Or would you tell her that there's some other way to meet your need for significance? Here's what the wisest man in the world except for Jesus Christ said about job satisfaction.

Context:

The English title "Ecclesiastes" unfortunately has no meaning for us. It comes from the Hebrew word Qoheleth, which means "the preacher." The root verb underlying Qoheleth, qahal, means "to come together or to bring together." Thus, the one who describes himself as Qoheleth is bringing together many observations and gathering them together in the form of a report on how to find meaning in life.

Let's identify the author of this book. In v.1, he introduces himself as, "the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." In 1:12, we learn that the Preacher was "king over Israel in Jerusalem." The only man who reigned over Israel from Jerusalem was Solomon, and the natural reading would indicate that this is indeed someone who had unsurpassed wisdom, privilege, money, and power, and yet turned away from God in a profound sense. This is important because no one was better equipped to conduct this investigation than Solomon was. He was a Howard Hughes, a John D. Rockefeller, a J.P. Morgan. He had virtually unlimited means intellectually, socially, and financially.

Vanity 1:1-2

And Solomon begins: Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, Vanity of vanities, all is vanity! The word vanity is translated by the rabbis as "futile; something from which no desirable end can be attained." (*Mezudath David*) It means something that is ephemeral, short lasting, brief, empty, and meaningless. In fact, Ecclesiastes seems to be a despairing book from beginning to end. In 12:8, Solomon again says, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!"

Work is Repetitious 1:3-11

Why? Because Solomon is searching for meaning. In v.3, Solomon asks, "What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?" In other words, "What's the point to all man does?"

Several times, Solomon uses the phrase "under the sun." The phrase under the sun is the key condition in this book. He repeats it in v.9, "There is nothing new under the sun" and v.14, "I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun." Solomon's perspective is bound by the natural things that he sees, his wisdom is limited to his own human wisdom, and that is encapsulated by this phrase "under the sun." This is essentially a secular viewpoint on life.

Now Solomon writes a poem that launches us into both the theme and pattern of the book. It is a circular pattern.

"A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.
Also, the sun rises and the sun sets, and hastening to its place it rises there again.
Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north, the wind continues swirling along,
and on its circular courses the wind returns.
All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again.
All things are wearisome, man is not able to tell it.
The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing.
That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done,
So there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which one might say, "See this, it is new?" Already it has existed for ages, which were before us.
There is no remembrance of earlier things; and also of the later things which will occur,
There will be for them no remembrance among those who will come later still.

Solomon looks at four things. First, the human life cycle. A generation goes and another comes to take its place. There is a strange circularity to that. We appear in infancy, then we go to childhood to adolescence to young adulthood to full adulthood and finally, to old age, and then we disappear. We come and we go. That is one cycle. Second, there is the sun. The sun rises, then it sets. Over and over again. It comes, then it goes, bringing day and night, day and night. Other aspects of nature follow the same circular pattern. Third, the winds. Blowing from the south, then from the north, over and over again, the winds travel across the world in a circular motion. And the water cycle is circular. The rivers pour into the sea, and the sea is not full because evaporation takes place, clouds pour out rain, and the rivers run over again. Over and over, the cycles turn again and again in a circular pattern.

Now the background to Solomon's quest for meaning is Genesis 3:17-19, man's sin and God's curious curse on man's work after the Fall. "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust you shall return." That is the circular limit placed on man. From our beginning to end, our life is circular. Our work contains a sense of futility and meaninglessness, tainted by sorrow and repetition. All achievements would be worn away by the mind-numbing circularity and repetitiousness of life. We are bound in our existence within this iron circle reality of dust to dust. That is what life under the sun means for us.

The question for us is this: If all things are circular, then everything comes back to where it started. If these universal cycles remain unbroken, then what does our life matter? Where have I made a difference?

Because that question is so poignant, there is something in us that rebels against this circularity. Darwinian evolution postulates that life has been getting better and better over time, following not a circle but a line that points upward. Humanity is the latest stage on that line, and supposedly there is a destination, though we know not what. Then, the idea of progress suggests that life has been getting better and better over time, following not a circle but a line pointing upward. After all, we are so advanced with our cell phones and modems, that we believe there is a destination, though again we know not what. But how does this upward sloping line account for the circularity we feel in life? Are we getting any better? Why does history seem to repeat itself in patterns? Why is it that "the more things change, the more things stay the same?"

It is because God has bound the universe in a circular pattern, with day and night, summer and winter, springtime and harvest. And He has bound the existence of men and women on earth within an iron circle. From dust you came, to dust you shall return. When people in ancient times leaned on their walking sticks and looked out into their world, they saw the regular pattern. They began in the early morning in spring, planting seeds in their fields. They tended the soil, and waited. They watched the crops grow. They fought off weeds day after day. Then there was the harvest. This was the pattern of their lives. They were locked in nature's circle.

Now we moderns don't really pay much attention to nature's circles. But we do lock ourselves in other circles. Everyday we wake up at the same time, to the same alarm clock. Everyday we make the same commute to and from our home.

What has happened to us is that we thought we could escape God's iron circle by constructing our own environment. We went from the farm economy, where our work cycle used to be a springtime to harvest cycle. It would take one year. Then we went through the factory economy, where our work cycle revolved around the repetitious assembly line. Put a piece here, put a piece there until the product was done, and then there was another product. Now, we are

in the information services economy, and our work cycle revolves around never-ending data. If you're in finance, every quarter, or every fiscal period, you run through the same process to get the same report. If you're a teacher, every year you teach the same material. If you're a homemaker, every week, you look through coupons. Projects start and projects end, only to begin again in a cycle.

How do you find meaning in circularity? We fool ourselves if we believe that work is meaningful, that continually advancing in our career is meaningful, that changing jobs to expand our skill set and our experiences is meaningful, that moving from one city to another is meaningful. But always we become more enmeshed in a deeper circle, a stricter routine, and you will not find meaning in your work. How do I know that? Because I am an Industrial Engineer. You might ask, "What does that have to do with it?" Well, I was trained professionally to make organizations efficient and to make corporations totally independent of any one individual. That means that I deliberately organize your job as a routine, AS A CIRCLE, so that if you leave, someone else can take your place pretty easily. And if your job gets too complicated, then you document things. That means you are rewarded for MAKING YOURSELF MEANINGLESS, obsolete. That is true no matter where you go.

Thus, what characterizes modern work? First, it is not a system that God is responsible for. Man has set it up. Second, work is now extremely repetitive. Third, work causes repetitive motion injuries, like carpal tunnel syndrome or bad eyesight or nervous tension or insomnia. Fourth, work causes emotional problems, like low self-esteem, anxiety, tension, passivity, and social alienation (1973 United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare report called *Work in America*). Fifth, work causes premature aging. Workers on some assembly lines are too fatigued to work at age 40. Women in some industries are old at age 30.

And yet, work is also demanding. Over two-thirds of Intel's employees work over 50 hours a week. Since the late 1940's, work time in the United States has been rising. Between 1960 and 1986, the time parents had available to be with children fell 10 hrs/wk for whites and 12 hrs/wk for blacks.

Why? Because people think we can find a way out of the circle by moving from job to job. We get excited by "career advancement." But let me tell you (from an industrial engineering standpoint), you're just moving into a position that is just as repetitious. You're just hopping onto another circle that will be more intense than the one before it.

In v.12, Solomon embarks formally on his quest. He considers three aspects of work that people commonly try to find meaning in: wisdom, self-centered ambition and hedonism, and living for the next generation.

Wisdom Brings Pain: 1:12-18

He starts wanting to be a professor. He sets out in search of the greatest commodity of ancient times: wisdom. "I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven." It starts off innocent enough. He wants to be a student. We might think of this today as self-improvement. But right away, there is a grim observation. "It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind."

What did Solomon observe? He explains in v.15-18. "What is crooked cannot be straightened," which seems to mean certain patterns cannot be changed, that the circle cannot be broken. Furthermore, "and what is lacking cannot be counted." There is therefore something missing. He feels empty. He would later refer to this emptiness inside as "eternity in their hearts," the God shaped void in our hearts that cries out for God to fill it.

But is there something that Solomon didn't consider? Unlikely. Look at v.16: "Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge." He didn't leave anything out. So in v.17-18, he says, "And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain."

Why? Why is information painful? I can think of two reasons. First, because there is too much of it. Did you know that the amount of printed information is doubling approximately every 2 years? Xerox Corp estimates that 2,000,000,000 pages of paper are copied everyday. Who knows how fast the internet is growing? (How many computer languages are invented year after year? There were more users of the web in its first 4-5 years than the

telephone in its first 30. A population the size of the United Kingdom joins the internet every 6 months. Internet traffic doubles every 100 days. 18 million new internet users will join the net in one month. In 1993, the World Wide Web had 143 file servers. In 1995, it had over 40,000.) But researchers at Carnegie Mellon University have found that people who spend a few hours a week on line experience higher levels of depression and loneliness.

And second, because invariably the information highlights man's problems. Just read the front page of any newspaper. It's about poverty, scandals, war, deception, and carelessness.

In 1934, T.S. Eliot observed in *Choruses From the Rock*,

"The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven,
The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit.
O perpetual revolution of configured stars,
O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust."

That poem was written sixty years ago, and yet it sounds like it could have been written yesterday. That's because we are on a circle, and we actually haven't changed at all.

Let's fully embrace this circle as a paradigm that describes life. If we were to walk around and around in a circle, then we start to feel the vanity of it. It's futile. It's boring! We're not really going anywhere, and then our necks start craning to see if there's anything beyond the circle.

If we are bound in an iron circle of dust to dust, might there be something beyond death? Might there be a resurrection? There's a clue, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Self-Centered Pleasure Seeking: 2:1-11

The next thing Solomon tries is self-centered ambition and pleasure. Look at 2:1, "Come now, I will test you with pleasures. So enjoy yourself." But no sooner does he start than he concludes, "And behold, it too was futility."

Man, this is bleak! Exactly what went through Solomon's mind? He gives us a window into his mind in v.2-3. Look at the questions he asked: I said of laughter, It is madness, and of pleasure, What does it accomplish? Then he experiments with alcohol. I explored with my mind how to stimulate my body with wine." Solomon tried to make his life a non-stop party but he feels like he doesn't accomplish anything.

So what does he do to feel like he's accomplishing something? He does what all people do when they start to feel insignificant: compulsive home improvement and gardening.

I enlarged my works;
I built houses for myself
I planted gardens for myself
I made gardens and parks for myself
and I planted them in all kinds of fruit trees
I made ponds of water for myself from which to irrigate a forest of growing trees.
I bought male and female slaves, and I had homeborn slaves. Also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem.

Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces.

If Solomon were living in our day, he'd go to Home Depot and Orchard Supply Hardware. He lines up projects in his backyard, and runs loose with his spending. But notice who he does it for: HIMSELF. The phrase "for myself" appears six times in five verses, in v.4,4,5,6,8,8. Solomon is plainly living it up for himself, but his life is empty. He discovers the same thing Holden Caulfield did in Upper East Side New York. The adult world is empty.

Why? Probably because if you're living for yourself and your own happiness, then no one will make you happy, because no one will be as committed to you and your self-centered happiness as you are. Therefore, everyone will be a threat to your well-being. You can't trust anyone. And finally, if everyone is as self-centered as you, you know that relationships are just arrangements where you mutually use each other. That's the low level to which Solomon stoops in v.8: "I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men--many concubines." He has live musical entertainment and live sexual entertainment. Other people exist just to serve him, and when they displease him, he can fire them. We'd expect Solomon, or any man, to love this, but he hates it. Verse 11 says, "Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun."

Self-Improvement Again: 2:12-17

Solomon thinks about changing careers again and going back to being a self-improvement professor in v.12-17. "So I turned to consider wisdom, madness, and folly." If he can't be a hedonist, then he'll be wise, but he wakes up and realizes that the wise and the foolish share the same fate. They'll both die, as v.16 says, "For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die!" Death pretty much evens the score.

Living for the Next Generation: 2:18-23

The natural question that arises is, "Of course purely self-centered work isn't fulfilling. What about other-centered work? What about living for the next generation?" Solomon's reflects on this for a while, then says in v.18, "Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me." That is Solomon's scandalous answer. Living for the next generation is vanity. Now we might feel a little scandalized because we evaluate ourselves by our ability to "leave the world a little better" and "leave our kids a little richer." But I've got to be honest. I think Solomon is right.

A few years ago, I was talking with a friend of mine who was Chinese and raised in the American Deep South, in Mississippi. His family had pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, working hard at a store, dealing with the subtle pressures of being a different race than everyone else around them. My friend had even made it to Stanford and wanted to be a doctor. But every time he thought about why he was doing this, no answer was good enough. He had met some students in his program who were spoiled and had an ugly attitude of entitlement. My friend then realized that his kids would probably turn out the same way. Then he felt stupid giving his future kids a prestigious position in society and having them take it for granted and become spoiled rich kids. His conclusion: It's meaningless.

Solomon says the same thing in v.19, "And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity." I thought this was challenging, particularly for Asian-Americans or other immigrant groups. But the same sentiment is expressed in the Chinese classic, *The Dream of Red Mansions*. In that book, there is a family that was once great. Their house has since declined, and all their hopes for regaining their splendor rest on one boy, Pao-Yu. That boy fails. In the book, there is a poem called "Splendor Comes Too Late."

Love is only a reflection in a mirror
Worse still, rank and fame are nothing but a dream
So quickly youth and beauty fade away
Say no more of embroidered curtains and love-bird quilts
Nor can a pearl tiara and phoenix jacket
Stave off for long Death's summons
Though it is said that old age should be free from want,
This depends on the unknown merits laid by one's children
Jubilant in official headdress
And glittering with a gold seal of high office

A man may be awe-inspiring and exalted
But the gloomy way to the Yellow Spring is near.
What remains of the generals and statesmen of old?
Nothing but an empty name admired by posterity.

And because that was the last straw, Solomon completely despairs about work. "Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored under the sun."

The word despair means "to cease to hope." Solomon has ceased to find hope in working. That was his last good reason. If work brings despair, then it does not become more meaningful if you have children. A lot of people believe that having children makes work more meaningful. That's not true. Because one day, you'll have to force your children to work also, which is circular and will make them lose hope. Work has to be intrinsically meaningful in order for you to feel good about passing it down to your children. Otherwise you're passing down a curse!

And thus, Solomon concludes in v.21, "For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? Because all his days his task is painful and grievous." Work even gives Solomon insomnia: "Even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity."

And so Solomon's conclusion about work is this: It is vanity. From whatever angle you look at it, it is a circle with no way out. Because it is circular, you cannot find meaning in it because you have not really changed anything or made a lasting mark.

During World War II, those Jews who were not immediately executed were herded into concentration camps. In Hungary, the Nazis set up a camp where a large factory stood. The factory produced fuel for vehicles, and the Jews were made to work in the factory for the Nazis. In 1944, Allied aircraft began to penetrate deep into Europe. They bombed the camp, and the factory was destroyed. The Nazis commanded the prisoners to shovel the debris to the other end of the compound. The prisoners thought, "They're going to make us rebuild this wretched place." But the next day, they were ordered to move the debris back. "Stupid swine," thought the prisoners. "They made a mistake and now we have to undo everything we did yesterday." Day after day, for several weeks, the prisoners hauled the same mountain of rubble back and forth in a circular pattern of meaninglessness. Several of them started sobbing, and a few went mad. They felt clearly the reality that most of us don't like to admit. Our work, natural human work, is circular. We always come back to where we start.

Fear God: 2:24-26

But again, the whole reason work is circular is because we were made to lift our eyes beyond the circle and ask, "Is there anything else?" Any search for meaning must therefore focus on God. And Solomon finally does focus on God in v.24. "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God." Only God enables us to be content, not because He makes the work non-circular, but because our focus no longer is the work itself, but on the fact that God is eternal, and therefore our relationship with Him is eternal even though we are still walking around and around on this circle.

So God's voice breaks into the cycle and says in v.25, "For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without ME?" So as we go about our daily routines, do not try to find meaning in your work in and of itself. It's too repetitious. And don't try to find meaning in career advancement. That's not real progress. Instead, find contentment in a relationship that is eternal.

Now, I want to ask the question, is anything we do eternal? Only if four conditions are met. First, there must be a resurrection of a man, because if there is a resurrection of a man, then the iron circle of dust to dust is broken, and we have the possibility of a new destiny. Second, there must be the experience of a resurrection in us, otherwise we are not permanently connected with it. Third, there must be the ongoing involvement of that resurrected man in us and through us, because only he has that resurrection power. And fourth, we must be involved in the work of proclaiming that resurrection to others, otherwise we are not significant. Where are those four conditions met? In Jesus Christ alone, and in us giving our lives completely to him. His life through us is the work that is eternal.