

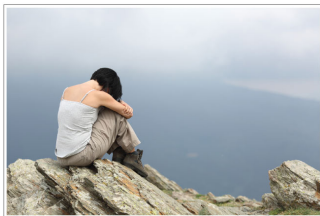


Douglas K. Stuart, Ph.D.

Experience: Professor of Old Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts

Ecclesiastes 1:2

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”



I. Introduction to Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is an unusual book. In fact, there have been quite disparate ways of interpreting this book. What kind of a book of the Bible starts out this way: “‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!’”? Well, Ecclesiastes does. What are we to make of this? What is God’s purpose in inspiring a book that seems to have so many negative or dour or critical kinds of things to say about life?

II. Overview of Ecclesiastes

A. Meaninglessness of Life (Ecc 1:1-4:16)

If we take a very quick run through the book, just to give the impression of what is there, we note that in the first chapter we have mention made that seems to say history is merely cynical and that death makes life absurd. Once you die, there is no memory of you. You are not conscious, and you cannot say, “Hey, that was a good life I lived, wasn’t it?” You cannot say anything; you cannot even think—you are dead. So in a sense, whether you lived a good or bad life, it does not matter. Once you are dead, you are not there to evaluate it. You are gone; you are dead. Wisdom yields only disappointment. It is even said in this book, “For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.”

Chapter 2 of the book seems to be going along that same negative route. Pleasures and projects are meaningless; wisdom and folly, basic categories that are terribly important, are themselves meaningless. Death makes life and work meaningless for the wise and foolish alike. When we come to chapter 3, we get some fatalism—there is a time

Ecclesiastes 3:1

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven."



Ecclesiastes 9:11

"I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all."

for this and a time for that; and a time when this happens, a time when that happens; and a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace. That is saying, "You do not control your life. It just sort of happens. These things come as their time comes for you." Or in chapter 4, there is more about how meaningless things are. The writer says that in topics like oppression or envy or materialism or success or career, you just find it is meaningless; it is a chasing after the wind.

B. Exhortations (Ecc 5:1-10:20)

In chapter 5, there is some advice about guarding your steps when you go to the house of God, so certainly worship is not meaningless. "Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools." That sounds perfectly fine, but then when you move on from there, you find that in the latter part of chapter 5 such things as political power or wealth are just meaningless. They have no ultimate meaning. They are empty; if you seek after them, you do not get anything.

Chapter 6 talks about the futility even of God's blessing; the futility of wealth; the futility of long life; the futility of both proverbial wisdom, the kind we find in the book of Proverbs, and also a speculative wisdom, the kind we find discussed in a book like Job. In chapter 7, the small benefits and large limits of wisdom are eloquently described by this obviously rather cynical author. In chapter 9, death is universal and final, so you can try to live authentically, but even one's talent is meaningless—even something as nice and pleasant as the various abilities we possess. In chapter 10, since the future is unknown, all you can do is live in the present the best you can.

C. Fear God (Ecc 11:1-12:14)

In chapter 11, you live in the present if you are young, because when you get old it is hard to enjoy anything or appreciate anything. That is the way it is, says the book. Then all of a sudden, we get this kind of statement: "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." That last statement, those last couple of verses, are very

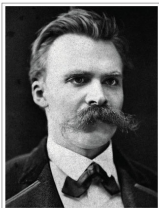
How do I interpret the message of Ecclesiastes?

“Life is meaningless!”

“God is dead!”

“Absurd!”

Friedrich Nietzsche



Friedrich Nietzsche
Wikimedia Commons

important to appreciate the book.

III. Interpretation

The approach I take is that of some interpreters, though the book is differently interpreted by various people. It is my suggestion that God has inspired Solomon or some other king (we do not know exactly who the author is; he just describes himself as a son of David or a descendant of David) to write for us a picture of what life would look like for a truly thoughtful person if there were no life after death and if there was no judgment. The end of the book says, “Do not miss the point: there is a life after death; there is a judgment; we must live our lives consistent with that awesome and important fact.” That is what gives meaning—God’s judgment gives meaning to our lives. God is the one who says this is right and that is wrong, these are valuable and those are not.

A. Death

But if we did not have a God, if we did not have a life after death, if we did not have a judgment, or if we only had a God who had created the earth and got it going and then sort of stood back from it and said, “I will just let people live and when they die, they die.” If that were the way things were, then many people might say (as many people have in history, in addition to the writer of Ecclesiastes speaking kind of tongue-in-cheek in these earlier chapters) life is meaningless. That is what the existentialists have done. Most existentialists have argued that because of death, life—to one degree or another—is absurd. What do they mean by that? How can it be that Nietzsche could say God is dead? What was the point he was trying to make? How could an existentialist say that because of death, life is ultimately meaningless? How can existentialists say, “You just try to live an authentic life; that is all you can hope to live, to live life with passion, to live life with enthusiasm—but you cannot say your life has meaning in any ultimate, firm, and permanent sense.”?

Well, they say it because there is truly a despair to life if it is not a life that looks forward to eternal life. One of the realities of Scripture is that we are taught, in all kinds of ways, that this life is a preparation for the next. This life is not an end in itself. That is why it is so dangerous to love



What is the
meaning of life?

this world, because this world is passing away. The place where we belong, the place we are created to be is not this world, but the next. This is where we start our life, but it continues forever in another place. It is terribly important to appreciate that if this life were all there was, it would not be much. Now some people might say, “Okay, I get the idea that if you do not have anything after life, you could say that once you die there is no meaning for you, because you are not alive to think of meaning or to consider meaning or to reflect on meaning. But, does not your impact live on?”

Well, what many people have answered in response to that is, “Yes, but only for a little while. Sure, there are some people who outlive you and who remember you, and your memory has some impact on them or maybe some of the things you have done had a slight impact, but eventually they die too. After enough time has gone by, you are nothing but a name. Nobody knows you personally; you are just one of those old names on a list somewhere. That is not meaningful. It is certainly not meaningful for you, because you are not around to enjoy the meaning.”

That is what I believe is going on in Ecclesiastes. We have the kind of thing that forces us to take a good look at what the value of life would actually be without life after death, without a judgment. What if this were all there was? What if we, like an ant or a chicken, would live for a while and then die? How could we speak of the meaning of life? Would becoming wealthy be meaningful? It certainly might be pleasurable for a time, and the writer of Ecclesiastes does not deny there can be pleasure in a life without an afterlife, but would it be meaningful? Would it be meaningful to be poor? Would it be meaningful to be smart? Would it be meaningful to be undereducated?

B. Life after Death

In asking this question, the writer forces us to examine how terribly important it is that we have a life after death and a judgment, which does put this life in perspective. It is what God has created that actually makes the approbation for this life good or bad. It is a little bit like, though not exactly like, the situation of the course that ends before turning in the paper, before turning in the final exam, before getting a grade. Sure there is some value to it, but

Judgment

you cannot necessarily tell how well you have done. You want the professor to tell you, “this is how it went.” Or, the game gets called off because of rain before enough innings have been played, and there is not a resolution to it. The end of this book is really central to the theme of the whole.

IV. Conclusion to Ecclesiastes

What good then does Ecclesiastes do us? Well, it does us good in many ways. It really forces us to look at what life is all about, what is important. Where are you getting your values? Are you aware that this life is a preparation for the next and not an end in itself? Often people in settings where intellectuals are involved in considering the Christian life have used Ecclesiastes as an evangelistic tool. They have placed it in people’s hands and said, “since you do not believe in a life after death, since you do not believe in a judgment, since you do not believe in a God who will examine your life and decide whether you have done right in His eyes, read the first part of this book and see if it does not, in fact, lay before you in the barest, starkest terms how little you have to look forward to—living only for yourself and only for the present.” That is the great danger. There is meaninglessness in that ultimately.

But thanks be to God it is resolved, because there is a life after death; there is a judgment; there is an eternal God. We belong to Him. This life, in this place, on this planet, at this time, is not all there is. So the conclusion answers the question, “Is life meaningless?” And the answer is, “Not for us who know Christ as Lord and Savior. It is full of meaning and always will be.”

V. Introduction to the Song of Songs

The book of Song of Solomon (also often called Song of Songs because that is actually the way it is titled in the Hebrew) is a love poem. Or one might say it is a kind of compound, complex love poem made up of quite a number of individual poems, woven very carefully together. Some scholars used to think that a book like Song of Songs was, in fact, a disparate bunch of poems kind of crammed together. But more recently, scholars have been able to demonstrate the tremendous level of consistency and vocabulary and theme and poetic style and so on.

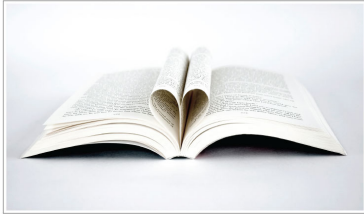
Ecclesiastes 12:14

“For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

Song of Solomon

Song of Songs

Canticles



So you might ask the question, “Why did God put a love poem in the Bible, a big, long, eight-chapter love poem in the Bible—what was His motive here?” We believe that the Scripture is from God for our benefit; these are things He wants us to know. So what is it that we find when we come to the Song of Songs? What kind of benefit is there for us to read about someone describing the person he loves, and she describing him whom she also loves, and then some other group of friends or acquaintances, who form a kind of a chorus, comment about the two of them or one or another of them?

Well, the answer is first to be found or approached in the fact that God has caused all of us to have a lot of brain cells devoted to sex. This is not the sex act per se, but what we broadly call sex; that is, the whole area of attraction and romance and love and marriage in life. This is a big area for everybody; Proverbs says it is important. Jesus also taught about marriage and about the significance of fidelity in it. It occupies parts of a number of Old Testament and New Testament books. The prophets frequently compare Israel’s unfaithfulness to God to the unfaithfulness of a woman to her husband. It is a big issue, and we see in the book of Song of Songs how God has laid this issue before us in a lyrical way; that is, in a musical poem.

VI. A Love Song

This is what many cultures do. In our own culture, think of what popular music has as its primary theme. Is it not love? Love songs are 99 percent, it seems, of the most popular music. They may not be very brilliant poems. They may be, indeed, what most of us would call doggerel, poor quality, very simplistic poetry—but most songs that are popular are songs about love in some way.

Now that is what people do; it is one of the things on their minds. Love is one of the most powerful impressions; it is one of the factors that cause them to think and act the way that they do. God has advice for us about romance and marriage. God has advice for you about the right way to love somebody.

A. A Wrong Way

Now let’s start from the reverse and ask, “What is the wrong way?” Well, the wrong way is to look at the other person as essentially someone who can give you physical pleasure.



That is the way that many people do it. All kinds of people today in our promiscuous age are looking for satisfaction, are looking for pleasure, are looking for delight, are looking even for meaning in sexual liaisons. That is where they think they will find it. There are all kinds of people working for the weekend, and on the weekend going out and looking for somebody to link up with, somebody to have a romance with, somebody to perhaps go to bed with. That is the way they see life; that is the way they see their week.

Newspapers, often advertising magazines, and the Internet have large sections frequently devoted to people trying to find a mate. So you get all these ads: “Divorced white male, age such and such, seeks single, white female, for purposes of whatever.” There is a lot of this in our society. It is a good thing that God made us with romantic and sexual attractions, but it is a bad thing if we do not use them in the way that God intended. It is just like fire: you can use it for good purposes to keep warm, or you can use it to burn somebody’s house down. And so it is with romance and sexual attraction.

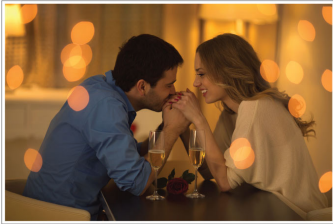
B. A Right Way

In the song, there are three basic characters: there is a woman and a man and a group that sometimes speaks. What we observe happening is that the woman and the man like each other. Never in this song do they actually consummate their love in sex—not because they will not and not because it is not intended to lead toward a godly marriage, but because this song is not about sexual technique. The Song of Songs assumes that any two people can have sex. That is not some great accomplishment. What the real accomplishment is: Can two people who love each other do all the things that love requires? And secondly, can they stay in love? That is what this song is about.

It is about doing the proper things that love requires, the godly kind of romance that a couple can have and secondly about continuing that romance. As a pastor, I often do marriage counseling, and one of the common statements I hear when a couple comes to me is worded something like this: “The romance has gone out of our marriage.” I have heard it many, many times. So often people get married in a kind of intensity of physical attraction, and then after



Romance



Love



some time has gone by during their marriage that physical attraction diminishes in some way, and they no longer feel an affinity for one another.

In other words, the act of sex was not enough to maintain the real bond of love—tender, true and powerful love—for one another. So Song of Songs tries to illustrate for us the way it should be. Having sex is not the issue. It is something you can do and must do, only after marriage and only within marriage. But what is important in this book is that two people love each other and show it. This book is about the way you love somebody else and show it to him or her. There are various ways it is portrayed. Sometimes they tell each other how much they like each other. It is very simple, and you can even get some funny descriptions from our point of view.

He tells her that her nose is like the tower of Lebanon, but this is not actually a physical description. What he is saying to her, “When I see your nose upon the face of the one I love so much, it is as impressive to me as seeing the tower of Lebanon from a distance.” Sometimes the descriptions we have in the book are of ethereal dream sequences. There is one description in which she is in bed and asleep and dreams that he comes to the door and knocks. She cannot get herself to move fast enough, like those kinds of dreams most of us have where somehow we move very slowly in the dream; we are trying to do something or get out of harm’s way and just cannot make it. By the time she finally gets to the door to open it to welcome him in, he is gone. How sad she is he is gone, a way of demonstrating that she really loves him.

VII. Conclusion to Song of Songs

Some scholars think that this book progresses in such a way that in the middle of the book they actually get married, and then the remainder of the book is talking about their life together as a couple. That may be, but I do not think it is necessary to assume that. The thing to look for in this book is God’s lyrical illustration for you of how people should be tender to one another, how they should be concerned for one another, how they should do acts of kindness for the one they love, how they should love that person exclusively and never consider being tempted away by others. It



is very important—fidelity in love and marriage. Even Solomon in all his splendor does not attract away the young woman from that shepherd boy that she really loves in this beautiful poem. The poem has in it emphases that also come from the words of the so-called friends, the kind of chorus. They look at the man and the woman, and they say things of advice that are encouraging or perhaps questioning.

“Where has your lover gone,” the friends say at the beginning of chapter 6, “most beautiful of women? Which way did you lover turn, that we may look for him with you?” This is a way of saying, “This guy is important in your life. If you guys love one another and if you are heading toward marriage as the book assumes, then you ought to think of yourselves as one flesh. You are really going to be a unit; you are going to be together; you are going to be psychologically together and romantically together and physically together. When you get married, a new family will form, and you will separate from your old families respectively. And so, we are concerned with you where your lover is; we do not want you to be apart.”

As the book goes on, there is essentially a resolution in which they really come together. And so, at the very end of the book: “Come away, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains.” “We are off; we are separate; we are like something distant. We do not want not to live in our society, but we want to be closer to each other than we are to any other human being.” So we have a love story in the Bible, a lyric poem, and a musical coverage of the theme of proper romance, of real care and exclusive concern for one another. This love is not just a product of sex but is the kind of thing that a marriage ought to start with and ought also to sustain throughout.