

I. Set Up

A. In sport's it's generally easy to know who wins. But what about in life? How do we keep score? Should we? Is the one who is happiest the winner? The person who lives the longest? The one with the best reputation? The richest?

B. Welcome to Christ Church on this holiday weekend. My name is ????. I want to extend a special welcome to those of you who are new. We're glad you are here. We know that some of you have taken a risk today to show up – showing up at church is not part of your normal drill. Thanks.

C. Today we begin a series, entitled, Discovering Life with God. In it we are exploring the question: what does it look like to win? What's the goal? What is the point of life?

D. And for help we are looking to the insights of King Solomon, who, 3,000 years ago wrote a book called Ecclesiastes in which he explores this. Writing from his unique position as King, he explores three common approaches to life.

E. Let me read you the first few paragraphs of the book he wrote. This is from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. 1:1-18 – I'm reading it from The Message, which is a modern paraphrase. And let me warn you, in this section he sounds pretty cynical.

1. These are the words of the Quester, David's son and king in Jerusalem. Smoke, nothing but smoke. There's nothing to anything—it's all smoke. What's there to show for a lifetime of work, a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone? One generation goes its way, the next one arrives, but nothing changes—it's business as usual for old planet earth. The sun comes up and the sun goes down, then does it again, and again—the same old round. The wind blows south, the wind blows north. Around and around and around it blows, blowing this way, then that—the whirling, erratic wind. All the rivers flow into the sea, but the sea never fills up. The rivers keep flowing to the same old place, and then start all over and do it again. Everything's boring, utterly boring—no one can find any meaning in it. Boring to the eye, boring to the ear. // Call me "the Quester." I've been king over Israel in Jerusalem. I looked most carefully into everything, searched out all that is done on this earth. And let me tell you, there's not much to write home about. God hasn't made it easy for us. I've seen it all and it's nothing but smoke—smoke and spitting into the wind.

2. ¹⁵Life's a corkscrew that can't be straightened, A minus that won't add up. I said to myself, "I know more and I'm wiser than anyone before me in Jerusalem. I've stockpiled wisdom and knowledge." What I've finally concluded is that so-called wisdom and knowledge are mindless and witless—nothing but spitting into the wind. Much learning earns you much trouble. The more you know, the more you hurt.

F. Some of you are thinking, "What? That's in the Bible? That doesn't sound like the Bible." In a moment, Mike is going to explain what's going on here. Right now...

II. Introduction¹

A. What does it take to win? I'm not talking about in Monopoly or Ping Pong. I'm asking about life. What does it look like to win? What are we after:

1. The corner office? Great health? Lots of money? Good friends? A long life? Inner peace? What exactly does winning look like?

B. Back in 2010, before he turned forty, Tiger Woods had won 14 majors, amassed a net worth of 700 million, had a beautiful wife and two healthy children. Then it all came apart. Was he winning before things unraveled, or was his success always a fake?

C. John Elway won two Super Bowl rings as a player and then started winning them as a General Manager – his place in the NFL's Hall of Fame is secure. In fact, since he took over as GM for the Broncos, they have the best record in football. But in an article in ESPN magazine a few months back, it says that Elway often goes into the office at 2 in the AM because he cannot relax. He hates losing and he is worried that he is going to be fired.

D. As a pastor, I often see the backstory of people's lives.

1. I know that Joe has a big job, tens of millions of dollars in the bank but he can't sleep through the night because he is worried that he's going to lose it. He suspects that his fears are irrational, but that doesn't help him sleep. Is he winning?

2. Jeff and I spent a bit of time together in college. He had straight As and many other accomplishments. After college, he went to Harvard Law School, which catapulted him to a big job in corporate law. Which he did for a few years and then quit to work as a bike mechanic. Those who knew him when he had his big job would have said he was a winner. Those who are asking him to change the tires on their kid's bike and oil the chain probably wouldn't. Who is right?

E. British author and prominent scholar, C.S. Lewis, once noted that there are three ways a ship in a fleet can mess up.

1. First, it can run into one of the other ships in the fleet

2. Second, it can break down and take on water.

3. Third, it can get lost.

F. These loosely equate to the ways we can mess up our life.²

1. Running into other ships is about not getting along with other people.

2. Breaking down ultimately points to some sort of significant collapse.

3. Getting lost is about not understanding where we are supposed to go.

What we are supposed to do. Not understanding our purpose. This is the one we are dialed in on right now.

¹ Thanks to Tim Keller for his sermon on Ecclesiastes, which helped shaped much of this sermon.

² In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis likens humanity to a fleet of ships sailing in formation. Three things can go wrong: (1) the ships collide with each other; (2) the ships take on water or suffer mechanical problems during the voyage; (3) the fleet sails to the wrong destination. Laws can help prevent collisions between people and can point society toward the common good. But they cannot keep individual "ships" from breaking down. As Lewis notes, "You cannot make men good by law; and without good men you cannot have a good society."

G. Do you know how to win? Do you know what you are supposed to do?

III. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon sets out to answer this question. You heard his initial remarks. He sounds a big cranky. His comments make it sound like life has no meaning. But that's a set up. The book is an enigma, but once you crack the code it's full of insight. And you crack the code by understanding two things:³

A. First, in the Book, Solomon is playing the part of a philosophy professor.

1. The King James calls him a preacher, but preachers are supposed to have answers.^{4 5} They are not supposed to talk like he talks. Some translations call him Koheloeth, which is a Hebrew term. They are saying, "it's too hard to translate." Eugene Peterson called him Quester – I think he made that word up. The reason they struggle is because Solomon plays a part we are not very familiar with. The closest I can come up is to imagine him as a philosophy professor who:

- a) Wants us to focus on life's biggest questions;
- b) Uses the Socratic method to pull it out of us;
- c) Anticipates our answers and dismantles them by showing where they lead. He brutally forces us to follow our thinking to its logical conclusion – which we seldom do.

2. You would not want to take the exam Solomon is giving. But like many hard teachers, if you do you can learn some very important things.

B. So, the first insight we need to understand Ecclesiastes is the unique literary approach he uses. The second thing we need to understand is the meaning of the refrain "under the sun."

1. It shows up over and over. He keeps talking about everything being vanity, smoke and vapor – nothing you can hold onto. His point is that life without God doesn't hold up. If what we see is all there is, then we've got problems. And his short hand phrase for this is: life "under the sun."

IV. Solomon opens Ecclesiastes asking: What's the point? What are we here for? How do we win? He then says:

A. "I set out to figure this out. I set out to leverage my privileged position to do this."

³ We gain additional insight into Ecclesiastes when we realize that it is the second of three wisdom books in the Old Testament, and that they are best read together: 1) Proverbs is the first. It talks about wisdom as if it's a person to be known, chased and embraced, suggesting that life is mostly likely to work best if we do; 2) Ecclesiastes comes second. It counters Proverbs a bit. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon is more of a cynic questioning the claims of Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs. Which directs us to Job, where things get hashed out; and 3) In Job, we have a long debate about whether pursuing a good life works, because it sure looks like it doesn't. But in the end, Job shows us that God is a lot bigger than we think He is and that we need to honor and seek Him.

⁴ The term people stumble over is the Hebrew word, Koheloeth. I am not going to drag you through a etymology lecture. The KJV (and others) translate it as "preacher." More recent versions often do not translate it because we have no simple English equivalent. So they just say Koheleth. The point to note is that a preacher is expected to bring answers. Solomon does not. He acts more like a "philosophy professor."

B. And what we see is that he quickly goes on the attack, shredding the three answers most people point to.

V. The first is humanism, which is the answer given by those who say, “the goal is to leave the world better than we found it.” I am going to die, but I will make a name for myself by making a difference.

A. There is some nobility here. And if we do good things, people will say nice things about us at our funeral. However, as the philosophy professor shows, don’t count on making a lasting difference or on being remembered.

B. In vs. 11, Solomon writes: Nobody remembers what happened yesterday. And the things that will happen tomorrow? Nobody’ll remember them either. Don’t count on being remembered.

C. Do you remember the scene in *Les Miserable* where the young, idealistic students who are getting ready for battle ask, “Will there be anyone who will remember me when I fall? Will anyone remember me at all?” He’s about to sacrifice his life for the good of others and he asks, “Will it be worth it?”

1. Solomon says: “No. Your girlfriend will cry for a few days and then marry someone else. She’ll move on.”

2. This is brutal. Solomon plays rough. But do you spend much time thinking about your great grandparents?

3. If we leave a few million to our alma mater, they’ll put a plaque on the wall for us, but do you look at those plaques? Do students look at the plaques?

4. People want to make a name for themselves. Can you name the senators from Illinois in the 60s? Any Roman Senator?

5. Solomon isn’t concerned with protecting our feelings. He says, “you will be forgotten. No one is going to pay attention to the good you do.”

D. If Solomon were talking to the scientist warning us about climate change destroying the world, he’d say, “You realize that we’re already doomed. Who cares if it come a bit earlier?” He would view worries about a warming planet like the captain of a sinking ship rushing out to the deck saying, “the boiler is about to explode and if it does we’ll sink 2 minutes sooner. We have to do something.”

E. The philosopher says, the real question is not, can we stop environmental degradation or nuclear holocaust. The real question is, does life have any meaning at all? Given that it is going to end, “Does life under the sun have any meaning at all? If what we see is all there is, then what is the point?”

VI. But wait, you say. Just because my life isn’t going to matter in a thousand years, doesn’t mean that it doesn’t matter now. I can have fun now. OK, this pushes you into one of the other two main views. The first is hedonism.

A. Crass hedonism means you sign up for Hedonism Weekend so you eat and drink to excess and have lots of random sex.

B. There is a more moderate form of hedonism. Woody Allen articulates a more respectable shade of this view at the end of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, when he says, “All you can hope for is to enjoy the pleasures of the day. So, write a poem. Ride a boat on a lake; enjoy your work. Enjoy. Just don’t look at the big picture because we can’t find answers and you’ll get depressed.”

C. Solomon critiques this view in verse eight. He says, “Been there. Tried that. It didn’t work. Solomon said, I decided I would give myself over to anything I wanted. And since I was king I could do this in ways and at levels no one else ever could. I didn’t deny myself any pleasure. I hoped this would make me happy. But it didn’t work. It was an exercise in chasing the wind.

D. Solomon is not alone in his critique. Philosophers have long talked about the hedonism paradox, which is occasionally referred to as the hedonic treadmill – which says, “it doesn’t matter how much we have today. Tomorrow we are going to want more.”

E. And oh by the way, bad things will happen. People we love will get sick and die. We will get sick. If you love to eat and drink to excess you’ll probably get sick quicker. Things go wrong. Pleasure fades.⁶

F. Hedonism isn’t a bad try if you can kill your humanity by refusing to think. But the eye is never satisfied with seeing or the ear with hearing – you will keep going there.

VII. Which sets up the third option. Existentialism.

A. I’ll move quickly here. I realize that you didn’t sign up for a philosophy class. The third option Solomon attacks is what we have come to call existentialism. This is the view that says, “Yes, life is meaningless, but we can choose to defy the cruelty and live with courage. And that is the noble and right thing to do.”

B. Existentialism came into its own in the 20th century. The big names here are people like Camus and Sartre. They said, “You’re right. Life is meaningless. But come what may, I will be noble in the face of it. That is what it means to be human.”

1. Some of you may remember, *The Man of LaMancha* – the movie starring Peter O’Toole and Sophia Loren (*To Dream the Impossible Dream*). The movie was based on a play, which was itself based on the 17th century novel, *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. In it the main character is this bumbling old coot who discovers that there are no knights, chivalry, rights and wrongs. But he decides to live as if there are. He fights windmills acting as though they are dragons and he defends a prostitute, acting as though she is a noblewoman. The play is over whether he is insane or not. He says he is insane. He says he has decided to spit in the face of absurdity and live as if there is meaning.

⁶ And to be consistent with this view, we need to maintain that life has no real meaning. Thoughts and feelings are just electrochemical reactions in our brain. There is nothing noble and good, no beauty. There is no real difference between noise and music. Nothing means anything.

C. In verse 17 he says, “I applied myself to wisdom, and madness and folly.” He tried existentialism. He tried being crazy against the rebellion of the age. And said, “It doesn’t work.”

1. If there is no meaning, how can you say that living with courage is a good thing. If there is no god, then on what are you basing your sense of right and wrong? You can’t decide that things do not make sense but you’re going to act like they do. You must say; my life is insignificant. Everything is.”

VIII. Ecclesiastes reads like a test in which Solomon pre-emptively says – we already know (or we should if we are thinking clearly) that these three options do not work. So, what is the meaning of life?⁷

A. I tried the “be good” for others. That doesn’t really work.

B. I tried the “eat, drink and be merry,” but that gets old.

C. I decided to create my own values and meaning, and that is a house of cards.

D. By the way, because I am smarter and richer and more powerful than you are, I did these in a big way. They do not work.

IX. So, what is the answer? What does Solomon recommend? At the end of Ecclesiastes – the very, very end – he gives his answer. The last two verses of the last chapter read:

A. Now all has been heard here is the conclusion of the matter:

Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.

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

X. About thirty years ago I heard an author being interviewed, and he said he was trying to write a novel in which nothing made sense until the very last word. Well, that is the Book of Ecclesiastes. It only makes sense when you read the very, very end of the book.

A. According to Solomon, the way forward involves a relationship with God.

XI. Please note, however, that this is not the last word on the topic. In an important sense, the real answer to Ecclesiastes is not found in Ecclesiastes, it’s found in the Gospel of John.

A. Before we go there let me give you a bit of background. Imagine that your friend complains about their new popcorn maker – saying that it’s bad and it never makes good popcorn. It burns everything. And you go over and see that what they bought was an expresso machine, you would say, “I know why this is making bad popcorn. This machine is not designed to make popcorn. You are using it wrong.”

B. Greek philosophers said, when you look at something, you must find out what the logos is – the reason behind the design. You need to ask, “What did the creator of this machine create it to do? What is its purpose? If you can understand what it was made for, then you can use it rightly.”

⁷ It seems likely that if Solomon was writing today he might add, “I tried not having a philosophy other than living really, really fast and trying to do everything. But that didn’t work.”

C. And from this starting point, they went on to say, “to figure out the meaning of life, we need to figure out our purpose. Our reason for living. Our logos. Once we know that then we can live lives of meaning and we will not have so many problems?”

D. If you’ve read any Greek philosophy, you know that they could not agree. No one could establish an answer that held up to the question, “what am I here for? What is my purpose.” And by the time Jesus showed up, most people had given up hope that we were going to be able to figure it out. There was lots of despair among Greek and Roman philosophers. They didn’t think there was a meaning or that we could figure it out.

E. And then John opens his Gospel saying, “There is meaning. There is a big idea, a central truth. But it’s not a concept, it’s a person. It’s not a theorem you read in a book, it’s God in the flesh and he has shown up. And that is what John says in the opening of his Gospel. He speaks right to the philosophers.

1. Matthew writes his Gospel for Jews; Mark for Romans. Luke for Gentiles, but John for the Greek philosophers. And the answer he gives – that he opens his book with – is, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word (Logos) was with God and the Word was God.”

F. And this all pivots around the logos, which went to the central question the philosophers were asking. The logos refer to something’s meaning or purpose.

G. Instead of living lives of futility we can live lives of utility. Instead of nothing meaning anything, everything means something. Everything has value. It was created by God and for God and his glory.

XII. Men and women, the claim of this series is that we discover life in God.

A. Our purpose, life’s meaning, the context for everything, comes from God. The way forward is to discover life with God. Let me be as clear as I can be: your life is better if God is at the center.

1. We were made by God and for God. And among other things, that means, if we try to put our own happiness ahead of obedience to God, we violate our own nature and become -- ultimately -- miserable.⁸

B. And point two: Jesus is the path.

1. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus will announce that He came so that we could have an abundant life – a life of meaning. And an eternal life.

2. He would agree with Solomon, life under the sun doesn’t have ultimate meaning. Humanism, hedonism and existentialism all ultimately fail.

3. What Jesus says in the New Testament is: "If you seek happiness more than you seek Me, you'll have neither; if you seek to serve Me more than serve happiness, you will have both.

C. We can rise beyond the sun – there is a God who created the sun and everything else – and that changes everything.

D. It means what we do – what you do – matters. It matters to God and that means it matters forever.

⁸ *Tim Keller, The Meaning of Marriage. (2011)*

E. It means that when the baby cries at 2 AM and you go in to pick him (or her up), you do not have to think:

1. This child came about by accident and will go away forever.
2. Or, I feel a bond to this child, but that is just chemistry in my brain. It's not anything more than that.
3. No, you can say, this child was made in God's image and matters and will matter for ever. You can be lost in wonder and love and praise. God is there. God provides meaning. Life under the sun doesn't hold out. But live above the sun – life with God – does.

F. We need to Discover Life with God. You need to discover life with God. You need Jesus as your logos, because when that happens, things fall into place.

1. We have a chance to seek an abundant life now and to rest in the promise of eternal life to follow.

XIII. Look, I realize that I haven't made my point. If this is new you should have questions. Lots of questions.

XIV. I also realize that among the first may be, does God even exist? You do not know if you believe in God or not

A. I am sympathetic because faith was not easy for me. It seemed to be a lot easier for those around me to believe than it was for me. But I got there, not in spite of the evidence but because of it.

B. You need to take a grown-up look at things. The fact is, it's likely that Solomon undoes you. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, he unmask the views most people adopt and says, "these do not work." In Ecclesiastes, he tries to help us see where we are headed.

C. Many people are living lives that do not really make sense. If we had more time I'd argue that you are living off God's capital without acknowledging his Lordship.

D. But I've thrown enough heady stuff at you for one morning. Instead let me note, what I discovered was that alongside all the intellectual debates about God, I couldn't shake a sense that He existed.

E. At the time, I did not like church or the Bible. I didn't a lot of the people. But I couldn't kill the still small voice that was telling me there was something more.

F. Later, after coming to faith, I would see that this was part of God's plan. In Romans 1 we are told that we know there is a god whether we want to admit it or not. We cannot ultimately shake the feeling that he is there because he put that in our heart, and as a result we cannot live as if there is no meaning or God. We know He is there.

G. If you are not sure you believe in God, thanks for coming. I hope you'll come back. I also hope that you will talk to Christians, start to read the Bible and show up at one of the 125 small group discussions that will take be taking place this week.

1. There is a way forward. And it is bigger and better than you can imagine. Jesus is the discovery of a lifetime. There is no one like Him. He is the way forward. Our goal is to find and follow Him.

XV. Prayer:

A. Father, help us see the conclusions of our views and get on the right path.

- B. Help us not just know about you but know you, and give ourselves to you.