

Wise Words to Honest Questions

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- [0 : 00] Friends, just so you know, before we begin this series of sermons, these sermons are designed to be accessible for people who are not of Christian faith.
- That is, they're designed to be evangelistic as well as explaining the scriptures. So you might think of that in future weeks. They are also, if I could put it this way, a little more philosophically inclined, a little more about current issues and so on.
- And then many of our sermon series are and probably a little more topical for that reason as well. So just so you know that ahead of time. But we've got five weeks on this glorious book, sometimes depressing book, but it's a great book.
- So hopefully we'll have a great time looking at it together. How about I pray? Father, thank you so much for your word. We thank you for this book of Ecclesiastes. We thank you for the way that it directs us to think seriously about life and to ask wise questions about life and to give wise answers.
- Please help us as we look at it today. We pray in Jesus name. Amen. There is an age you get to when people obviously find it hard to buy Christmas presents for you.
- [1 : 22] Some of you will know this age already. Well, I've got to it. And you can tell when you've got to that age because the coffee table books begin to arrive. Or the games.
- Or the puzzles. Or assorted bits of clothing. Or obscure things that you don't know what to do with. But someone thinks you might be able to work it out.
- Well, I did reach this age some time ago and I got one of those coffee table books. And this one had about an hour or so of reading in it about quotations basically from gravesides.
- From tombstones. And so I had an hour of quotations to bore my Christmas guests with. And tonight I'd like to bore you with just a few of them as well.
- For example, take this one from England written by a wife addressed to her husband. Grieve not for me, my husband dear. I am not dead but sleeping here.
- [2 : 27] With patience wait. Prepare to die. And in short time you shall come to eye. Now, as it happened, she was quite a wealthy woman. And it turns out that she had left her grieving husband a significant sum of money.
- And so with care and deliberation he spent some time carving a reply beneath her epitaph. And his words were as follows. I am not grieved, my dearest wife.
- Sleep on. I've got another wife. Therefore I cannot come to thee. For I am going to spend the cash on she. Now, let me give you another one.
- This is a tombstone in India in memory of a missionary. Let me read the first three lines to you. Sacred to the memory of, we'll call him, the Reverend Joe Bloggs.
- Who, after 20 years unremitting labour as a missionary, was shot by his faithful native bearer. Directly below the epitaph is a quote from Matthew 25 verse 21.
- [3 : 34] It reads, Well done, thou good and faithful servant. A first century tombstone has this inscription.

I was not. I became. I am not. And it's that last tombstone I just want to reflect on for a little moment. Let me repeat it. I was not. I became.

I am not. You see, this tombstone is not designed to be humorous. It contains a very serious philosophy of life. The tombstone tells us that the person under the ground assumed that we came from nowhere, we existed temporarily, and then we went nowhere.

And the owner of this tombstone is not the only one to have a view like this about the meaning of life. Listen to a few others. The first one comes from a man called Mencken, and he said this.

The world is a gigantic flywheel making 10,000 revolutions a minute. Man is a sick fly taking a dizzy ride on it.

[4 : 41] Now, another anonymous writer says, life is a jigsaw puzzle. Except that you don't know what the picture is supposed to look like, and you don't even know if you've got all the pieces.

And the Greek philosopher Pythagoras said, life is like the Olympic Games. A few people strain their muscles to carry off the prize. Others sell trinkets to the crowd for a profit.

Some just come to look and see how everything is done. Now, the philosopher Albert Camus said that life was like the task of the mythological hero Sisyphus, who was condemned forever to roll a rock up the mountain, only to have it roll back again.

And hence he would have to repeat the exercise. Leo Tolstoy said, what is life for? To die? To kill myself at once? No, I'm afraid.

To wait for death till it comes? I fear that even more. Then I must die. Then I must live. But what for? In order to die. And I could not escape from this circle.

[5 : 53] That's a very depressing view of life, isn't it? Somerset Moore, in the English novelist from earlier this, earlier the last century, rejected any kind of religious belief. But he couldn't avoid the question about the meaning of life.

And so he said, if one puts aside the question of the existence of God and the possibility of survival as being something too doubtful to have an effect on one's behavior, one has to make up one's mind what the meaning and use of life is.

If death ends all. If I have neither hope for good to come nor fear of evil, then I must ask myself, what am I here for?

And how in these circumstances I must conduct myself? But the person I want you to listen to most is Philip Adams. Philip Adams has been a writer for the Melbourne Age for a long, long time and is one of Australia's most well-known atheists.

In his book, Adams versus God, he says, I believe and I have always believed that life is totally meaningless and that we have no destiny, no purpose, no author.

[7 : 10] We just are for a little while anyway. And then we aren't. Now, let me tell you that I think Adams probably thinks he's quite new.

But of course, our first century tombstone said exactly the same words, didn't they? And let me tell you also that Adams thinks that he's saying something that is particularly offensive to Christians.

But I don't think that is the case at all. For you see, Adams, if I could put it gently, is on the side of the angels at this point. Adams is on the side of God. Adams is on the side of the scriptures.

Adams is merely echoing the sentiment of the Bible itself in one way. You see, the writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes has been where Adams wants to go long before Adams even started thinking about it.

For tonight, I want to share with you some of the insights of the book of Ecclesiastes. And it says some devastatingly stinging things. For what the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes does is to choose most of the things in life that give us meaning and to shoot them down in flames.

- [8 : 22] Let me give you some examples. The first example comes from Ecclesiastes chapter 1 verse 2 that we read. So you might have your Bible open at this point at Ecclesiastes chapter 1. This is the general thesis of this author, which we are going to keep coming back to in the coming weeks.

The general thesis is this, where he says, Vanity of vanities, says the teacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Another translation, the New International Version, puts it this way.

Meaningless, meaningless. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. Now, the point is pretty clear, isn't it?

All life is saying is untrustworthy and insubstantial. No endeavor in life will bring permanent satisfaction. All earthly life is subject to the complete absence of meaning.

It appears as though this is what he's saying. All is utterly meaningless. Now, for some people who have commented on the book of Ecclesiastes, they can't bear with him saying this. And so they come up with a framework which enables him not to be saying this.

- [9 : 31] But I think he's saying exactly what he's saying. And if it's not enough for this writer of the Bible to merely state his thesis, he then methodologically sets out to prove his thesis.

He claims that his thesis can be proved by experimentation. It can be proved by anyone involved in life itself. It can be proved by observation. You just have to look and you can see it.

So let's have a look at him having a go at proving it. First, 3 to 11, which we've already read. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises, the sun goes down and hurries to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north. Round and round goes the wind and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full.

To the place where the streams flow, where they continue to flow. All things are wearisome, more than one can express. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing.

- [10 : 40] What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done. There is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it has said, see, this is new?

It has already been in the ages before. The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come. By those who come after them.

Now, can you see what is being said here? Nature and history and human existence are one big, meaningless round of repetition.

That is what is being said. So what is the point of life if it is just one cycle going over and over again? What point can there be if there is no real progress?

No progress makes effort useless. Nothing is changed by us or by our effort. That's what he's saying. Nothing new is created. Life is meaningless, utterly meaningless.

- [11 : 42] Now, he doesn't mean there's no new iPad coming or anything like that. He doesn't mean that sort of thing. He means really, essentially, in the things that make humans tick, there is nothing new.

And if that is the case, life is utterly meaningless. But many of us are not happy with that. You're probably sitting here not happy with that. And so we look for meaning in other places.

We look for meaning, for example, in pleasure. And this writer has tried it out. He's had a go at pleasure. So have a look at him. Chapter 2, verses 1 to 11. So I said to myself, Come now.

I will make a test of pleasure. Enjoy yourself. But again, this also is vanity. I said of laughter. It is mad and of pleasure.

What use is it? I search with my mind how to cheer my body with wine. My mind's still guiding me with wisdom. And how to lay hold of folly until I might see what is good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

[12 : 44] I made great works. I built houses. I planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.

I bought male and female servants and had slaves who were born in my house. I also had great possessions of herds and flocks more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.

You can see what he's saying. He's saying, I put everything that makes your heart glad. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces.

I got singers, both men and women, the delights of the flesh and many concubines. So I became great. And I surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. And also my wisdom remained with me.

Whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure. For my heart found pleasure in all my toil.

[13 : 46] And this was my reward for my toil. And then I considered all that my hands had done and all the toil I'd spent in doing it. And again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind.

And there was nothing to be gained under the sun. It is caustic, isn't it? This writer is clear. Pleasure is enjoyable, but that's it.

That's as far as it goes. It is enjoyable. It's pleasurable. That's it. It hardly gives meaning to life. What about work then?

Maybe we can find meaning in work. Again, the writer is unrelenting and truthful to the extreme. Listen to what he says in chapter 2, verses 18 to 23. Look at it with me.

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me. And who knows whether they will be wise or foolish.

[14 : 49] Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and I gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it.

This is a vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain and their work is a vexation.

Even at night their minds do not rest. This also is a vanity. It is devastatingly true, isn't it? The alarm goes off.

You get up. You put on some clothes. You eat your breakfast. You travel to work, or whatever it is you do. You eat again. You do a bit more work.

Then you go home. Perhaps a bit of food and drink. Perhaps a touch of TV. Perhaps some work around the house. Then you go to sleep. And then tomorrow, it starts again. And one day you say, Why?

[16 : 04] And the answer screams back, says the writer of Ecclesiastes, Who knows? Life is meaningless. Utterly meaningless. Surely this cannot be true.

Surely life has meaning. If nothing else, then surely we're in a better situation than animals, aren't we? I mean, I've got a couple of dogs. I want to say I'm in a better position than they are.

Surely we have some advantage over the brute beasts. Or the kelpies, if you like. And again, this writer slams home the truth. Look at it in chapter 3, verse 19.

I said in my heart, with regard to human beings, that God is testing them to show that they are but animals.

For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same. As one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath. And humans have no advantage over the animals, for all is vanity.

[17 : 08] All go to one place. All who are from the dust and all shall return to the dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth.

Philip Adams, let your heart out, really. Now, if you think that this writer is particularly depressing, then let me tell you you haven't heard anything yet. Camus, Sartre, Adams, I think are in bright sunlight compared to Ecclesiastes.

Listen to this. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting. For death is the destiny of every man. The living should take this to heart.

Sorrow is better than laughter because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of the mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

I wonder if you can hear what he's saying. He's saying his point is if you want to understand life, then you'd better start attending funerals and reading tombstones. The right perspective on life is more likely to be found taking a look at a corpse being burnt up in a funeral parlor than enjoying a barbecue with friends in the backyard.

[18 : 26] That's a very sobering thought, isn't it? Now, I could go on all day with Ecclesiastes. It doesn't get any better. It is very depressing reading.

It is depressing. Why? Because we know he's on to something. That is, we have echoes ourselves. At the very edges of our existence, we have thought some of these things ourselves.

Perhaps not even letting them come to the light of day. It is depressing because we know it's real. Harsh experience has taught us that the world is often like this.

It is often like this. Often cruel. Often absurd. This is the world that we see, isn't it, friends, when we look around us.

It is a world that we meet in everyday life. Now, the question we need to ask is this. Why? Why is the world like this?

[19 : 33] Why is the world so apparently meaningless, empty, unforgiving and harsh? The Bible has an answer. The Bible has an answer.

And it is this. It starts on page one of the Bible. The Bible tells us the world was not set up like this. The world was not set up to be meaningless.

The world was not set up to be a place without meaning. The Bible tells us that when God made his world, he made it a good place and he looked on everything he had made and it was very good.

A place full of potential, full of meaning, full of relationships, full of peace, full of harmony, full of joy. And it tells us that this fullness was to be found in dependence upon your creator.

Fullness of potential, of harmony, of joy and of meaning was to be found in dependence upon the God who made us and who wanted us to live in a garden dependent upon him and with him.

[20 : 39] But the Bible tells us that humans did not and do not like the way God has set up his world. We don't like to be on the outside.

We don't like the, sorry, we don't like the idea of an outside, invisible ruler of our world. Not us. We don't like the idea of someone to whom we are responsible and accountable.

The Bible tells us that the human response to this idea of an outside ruler is to choose not to have them, and to choose independence. We choose to be our own lawmakers, our own rulers.

And the Bible calls this thrust for independence, sin. The next step that the Bible takes is to tell us that our independence comes with a cost.

It says that because of our bid for sovereignty, God has subjected the world to a curse. He has condemned humans to increased and painful toil.

[21 : 47] That their gardens will yield thistles and thorns. There will be pain in childbirth. There will be nasty things happening.

He condemned humans to increased and painful toil. To an endless round of daily toil. To a meaningless and fruitless existence. To a sort of meaninglessness that philosophers and wise people all across the world have recognized and testified to as their experience of life.

Please notice what I'm saying. I am saying that to some extent Camus is right. Sartre is right. Philip Adams is right. That Derrida is right.

If you look at the world with all your senses. If you feel it. Touch it. Think about it with your mind. Analyze it with your intelligence. Experience it with your pleasure.

Then you must come to no other conclusion than this. Life is meaningless. Utterly meaningless. And the Bible says it is like this because of sin.

[22 : 56] It is like this because God has placed a curse on the world. He has given us the sort of world that we want. A world without him ruling. A world without him reigning.

A world ruled by humans like us. A world that has no reason because it has no one in control of it. A world with no purpose. A world that looks random and meaningless.

Having said this. Let me say that Ecclesiastes thankfully is not God's final word. To our world.

You see Ecclesiastes did not believe in an afterlife. He was writing before people of the Bible began to believe in an afterlife. He did not believe in it.

Nor had he seen or heard of Jesus. And with the entry of Jesus into the world. This dramatic change comes. You see for with Jesus and in Jesus God acts.

[23 : 55] And the first thing God does in Jesus is that he becomes a human being. In Jesus God becomes one of us. He becomes a human.

And he lives the life that we live. He experiences the futility. And the meaninglessness that we all feel. In Jesus God comes into our world.

Twisted and bent as it is. And he suffers its worst wickedness. The one noble man. The one totally noble man.

Experiences an ignoble death. If there was ever a death that was unjust. It is this one. But the Bible says that while he is dying.

Something incredible happens. The Bible tells us that the God who was human. This just man. This righteous man. This man without sin.

[25 : 00] Takes the sin of the world upon himself. Before God. He takes that sin. And he suffers the penalty for it. He takes our place.

Before God. And he takes the curse of our sin. Upon himself. And in doing so. He turns an event which was wrong. And ignoble. And apparently meaningless.

And unjust. And totally devoid of any meaning. Into an event of victory. And full of meaning. When Jesus dies.

Defeat is turned into triumph. Meaninglessness. Is triumphed over. I want you to notice what I'm saying. When Jesus died. And then rose again from the dead.

He spelt out the possibility of reversing the human situation. He promised. That he is able to change meaninglessness. And a meaningless existence.

[25 : 58] Into one which has meaning. He promises to return us back to the original situation. And I want you to look at what the Bible has to say about this in the New Testament.

An incredible passage. Have a look at Romans 8. And I want you to listen for all the right words. See if you've heard words. That we've mentioned tonight.

So Romans 8. And particularly words that we've heard. In Ecclesiastes. Romans 8. 18 to 25. Someone got a page number they can yell out for people. 9.

19. 919. I look at it carefully. And listen to what it says. I consider.

That the sufferings of this present time. Are not worth comparing. With the glory. About to be revealed to us. For the creation. Waits with eager longing. For the revealing of the children of God.

[26 : 56] For the creation. Was subjected to futility. Meaninglessness if you like. Not of its own will. But by the will of the one who subjected it.

In hope. That the creation itself. Will be set free from its bondage to decay. And will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Can you see it there? God subjects it.

To something in order that. It might be freed from it. We know. That the whole creation. Has been groaning in labor pains until now.

And not only the creation. But we ourselves. Who have the first fruits of the spirit. Grown inwardly. While we wait for adoption. The redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen.

Is not hope. For who hopes. For what is seen. But if we hope for what we do not see. We wait for it with patience. Notice what he's saying. He's saying that belief in Jesus means.

[27 : 55] That we can find meaning in life. That meaning in life is to be found. In a life lived for Jesus.

If we accept that Jesus has died to forgive sins. If we believe that he's taken the curse upon us. Then life can have meaning for us again.

And this meaning is one that will last long past death. It will go on forever. That is the hope that we Christians have. An existence with meaning.

An existence with hope. And a future that gives present life meaning. An existence that will come. Where we live in peace and harmony with God.

As we can do now in Christ. And that will continue forever. So I want to go back to where we started. The question posed by our topic was whether life had any meaning.

[28 : 52] Whether there was life. Then death. Then nothing. My answer has three parts. Did you notice it as we went? Part number one.

I said. That a true examination of the world demonstrates its meaninglessness. The Bible agrees with the philosophers at this point. Two.

I said that this meaninglessness is imposed upon the world. By our sin. Because of our sin. Our sin causes the world to be under God's judgment.

Because we have cut God out of our world. Our world no longer has meaning without him. Without his rule. Three. When Jesus comes into the world.

He takes our punishment upon himself. He enters into our meaninglessness. And he suffers on our behalf. And by doing so. He takes away the curse of God's judgment.

[29 : 49] He gives us meaning and hope. So notice what I'm saying. Meaning in life can only therefore. Only. Be found. When we find a solution to our sinfulness.

Meaning in life. Meaning in life can only be found. When we find a solution to our sinfulness. And as far as I can work out. There is only one religion that has.

Effectively. And efficiently. Dealt with sin. And that religion. Is the Christian religion. The Bible is clear. Jesus Christ.

Alone. Deals with sin. Jesus Christ. Alone. And therefore. Deals with meaninglessness. Jesus Christ. Alone. Offers meaning. To our meaningless.

Existence. Friends. This talk tonight. Has just been to whet your appetite. We have four more weeks on Ecclesiastes.

[30 : 49] And next week. I'm going to look at how to read this book. Because it's. If you understand how to read it. It'll just open up for you. So I want to. I've done a bit of it tonight.

I've given you a little clue. If you read between the lines. You'll find out how I'm reading this book. It is just magic. If you know how to read it. But it. It is. Unrelenting.

In. It's an analysis. Of life. And therefore. If you've got friends. That think they've worked out the meaning of life. Come and. Get them to listen to Ecclesiastes. Because.

He might open their eyes a little bit. He might show them. What life looked at really. Is really like. So. Next week.

How to read the book. And then what it says about critical elements of life. We're going to have a look at things like pleasure. And things like sex. And things like death. And things like work. And we're going to see. What the writer has to say about them.

[31 : 45] So. Come and join us next week. And in the coming weeks. Let me pray. Father. We thank you. That Jesus Christ.

Alone. Deals with sin. That our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore. Alone. Deals with meaninglessness. And that he has offered.

Us meaning. To what looks like. An apparently. Meaningless. World. Father. We thank you. For the Lord Jesus. For his life. His death.

His resurrection. And his ascension. And we pray these things. In his name. Amen.