

## The Meaning of Life - Ecclesiastes 1:3-4

**Introduction:** He had learned to climb the corporate ladder. He was an achiever and came from a family of achievers. He had achieved position of senior vice president of a major oil company by the age of 42. His work load was heavy. His time was in demand. His family had to make the sacrifices, but finally, he had “arrived.” Now he could ease up a little, take some vacations, spend more time with the kids...but that is when he realized something. His kids were grown. His wife was a stranger. And his friends didn’t have time for him.

One day, as He came home from the office, he plopped into his easy chair, and began to think. “*What have I accomplished? Where am I? Where am I going? Is this my purpose in life? Is this what gives meaning to my life?*”

The fact is; this man is not alone. Many people are doing exactly the same thing, working for the same goals, and asking the same questions. Many people, when they really stop and think about it, are finding out that what they thought was valuable, is not very valuable at all. They are discovering that the “*good life*” isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. They are finding that happiness and fulfillment aren’t found in things like status, career, money, possessions, or beauty. Those things can’t even be maintained, much less protected.

They are also discovering that society that has betrayed them. It’s talked them into valuing the valueless, and bypassing the meaningful, and left them feeling lonely, bored, and dependent people who are only happy when they’ve killed the very time they have tried to save. It’s turned them into people who worry more about making a living, than they do making a life. They’re making a killing alright; they’re slowly killing themselves!

If you haven’t done it already, it’s time to do as this man did. It’s time to stop and ask yourself “*Where am I headed? What is my purpose? What is the meaning of life?*”

This morning, as we bring the year 2007 to a close, let’s use this time to pause and reflect. I want to try to help define the meaning and purpose of life. I want to help you avoid the same predicament in which this man found himself. How do we do it? First, I think we need to understand what a “*purpose*” is.

### 1. Understanding Our Purpose

Purpose is not a goal because a goal can be reached. But a purpose can never be achieved. It’s something that was here before you came along, and will be there after you’re gone.

A purpose is your reason for being, your answer to the question, “*Why do I get up in the morning?*” The simplest way I can define is this: First:

**A. Purpose Is a Direction.** North, South, East, West. Those are directions. And the amazing thing about those directions is, there is no end to them. My sister left a few years ago, “*to go out west.*” I told her to call me when she got there. She hasn’t called yet! Why, because she’ll never get there. Oh, she made it to the Grand Canyon, but there’s more west to go. She made it to Las Vegas, but there’s more west to go. She made it to San Francisco, and Oregon, and Washington State, but there’s more west to go. No matter how far west you go, there’s still more west to travel.

That’s a good description of purpose. No matter how far you go in reaching your purpose, there’s still more purpose to reach. So then, purpose becomes like a direction; it helps you choose where to go along the way. It’s your guide, your North Star, your compass. It is able to let you know at any given moment whether you’re living your life “*on purpose*” or not. But while purpose is a direction, it is also something else:

**B. Purpose Is a Drive.** When you drive a car, you are in control of it, guiding it, and directing it. The same is true of driving a nail. But it’s not true of driving a golf ball. When I do that, I have no idea which way it will go.

But the point is; everyone is driven by something; their past, their parents, their peers, or their partners. But the truly meaningful life will only be driven by their purpose. - A God-ordained calling upon your life. That is what makes the gospel such “*good news.*” It gives us a drive, a direction, a purpose. Without it, we are like a ship without a rudder - lost and out of control, drifting with the current. But with a purpose, we’ll be able to find our direction, and then steer our way toward it. And when the storms come, or when those unexpected changes occur, we can pass through them a whole lot easier. The second way to define the meaning of life is by:

## **2. Questioning Our Purpose**

Now this can be done at any time in life, but it’s better to do it early. Let me give you a Biblical illustration of what I mean.

Years ago, there was a man who lived who was more powerful than the President, richer than Bill Gates, and more popular than Elvis Presley. This man asked the question we are asking, “*What is the meaning of*

*life?*” He chronicled his search for the answer in a book - Ecclesiastes. His name was Solomon. Solomon was the son of King David, and Bathsheba. After David died, he became the king over Israel, and ruled for 40 years. During his reign, Israel ascended to the height of their power, peace, and prosperity.

In Solomon’s early life, he wrote a beautiful love story of one man and one woman - the Song of Solomon. In his middle years, he wrote most of the book of Proverbs. It was a collection of profound sayings garnered by a man who had observed life and taken good notes on what he saw. But it was in his later years when he wrote Ecclesiastes. By the time of it’s writing, his youthful zeal for life was gone. The wisdom and practicality of his middle ages was past. He was now a tired, cynical and sour old man. He had lived life in the fast lane, experienced all the glitz and glitter, worked hard and long hours, and now, it was as though he finally sat down in his recliner and pondered the question, *“What is the meaning of my life?”*

Let’s look at the question Solomon is asking in vs. 3: *“What does man gain from his labor at which he toils under the sun?”* The word *“gain”* means, *“the profit left over after the transaction is complete.”* So what Solomon is asking is this, *“When it is all said and done, what do I have left? What really matters?”*

We could put it like this: *“After I’ve climbed the corporate ladder, is it leaning against the right wall?”*

The word *“toil”* means *“laboring to the point of exhaustion, but with no fulfillment.”* Now to look at Solomon’s life from strictly a physical point of view, one would think that he would be successful and fulfilled. He had more money than he could possibly spend. He had more power than he could possibly use, and more popularity that he could possibly want.

But there is a difference between success and fulfillment. Success is getting what you want. But fulfillment is wanting what you get. A lot of people have reached the pinnacle of life and found that they got what they wanted, but they really didn’t want what they got. That was Solomon’s summation of his life.

Solomon said in vs. 14 - *“I have seen all things that are under the sun; and all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”* He looked back at his life, and figured that the whole thing was futile, meaningless, pointless, and purposeless. He would have had just as much fulfillment chasing after the wind.

And looking at life from a purely secular point of view, we would conclude the same thing. Solomon saw life as going in a predictable, patterned circle. He observed that generations would come and go, people were

born and then they died; the sun rose, it set, then it rose again. The wind blew one way, then another. The rivers continually flowed into the sea, but never filled it up.

To him, life was like the round we used to sing, “*Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream!*” Where do you stop that song? And have you ever noticed how depressing it is?

To Solomon, life was like that - rowing and rowing and rowing a boat day after day, year after year, and coming to the point of exhaustion and realizing that life was just a dream!

Is that the way you feel sometimes? That life is meaningless and empty? That you are just going in circles? Vance Havner used to say, “*Sometimes life feels like you’re in a rocking chair – sure, you’re moving, but you’re not getting anywhere.*” Sometimes we can feel like that. So what are we to do? Well, that leads to the last point I want to make; and that is:

### **3. Discovering the Purpose of Life**

If you’ve searched for meaning and came up empty, maybe you’ve looked in the wrong places. Solomon said in vs.13-14 “*I devoted myself to study and explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven...I have seen all the things that are done under the sun...*” No wonder he came up empty! He looked in the wrong places. He was looking under heaven and under the sun. In other words, he was looking in his own wisdom, in his own time, and among all the things he could see, and came up with nothing but disappointment, and meaninglessness emptiness

If there is nothing but emptiness under the sun, then our hope in life must be above it. Some religions worship the sun because there’s nothing greater. It gives warmth, light, and direction, so they bow to it, pray to it, sacrifice to it, and make it their idol.

Many still think that way. They have their heads planted so firmly in the here and now, they are blinded as to the possibility that there is something else...a higher power, a greater God that the sun or whatever is found under it. But there is that hope, that purpose, that meaning of life that is found beyond the sun.

Time is wonderful, but it's limited. We only have so much of it, and they ain't making no more! So, if you've tried to find meaning in the temporary things, and came up empty, then try another place. Try the realm of the infinite.

Remember, real purpose can never be reached, so how can it be found in the things we can see? There must be something beyond the sun, beyond time, beyond what we can see. Real purpose is only found when we look beyond ourselves to something that will live on after we're gone. Real purpose can only be found in God, and the only way off the treadmill is in a relationship with Him. When we look beyond this world with all its cycles, and dead-ends, we see that man was never meant to live that way. Our lives were meant to be lived, not going in circles, but in a straight line toward God.

**Conclusion:** St. Augustine said, *“He who has God has everything. He who does not have God, has nothing. He who has God and everything has no more than he who has God alone.”*

When you let God lead, guide, and direct, you have purpose. Life takes on a new meaning. Don't wait until you're old and cynical like Solomon to learn this. Don't waste time looking in the wrong places for meaning. Don't flitter away the next year or the best part of your life before you start questioning and discovering God's purpose for your life. You can know it now, by surrendering you all to Him today.