

Are You Wasting Your Life?

As we begin, I'd like to ask you a question. The question is, "What is your life all about?" I don't know how you answered that question, but how you answer the question reveals whether or not you are truly honest with yourself about your life. How you answer the question reveals whether or not you really have wisdom or not. In fact, most of us, if we're honest, would like to change some things in our lives. Maybe some of us would like to change a lot of things. You might cringe at failures of your past, might cringe at mistakes or lost opportunities. As I thought about my life recently, I thought about things I would like to change. I suspect that you would like to change some things as well. Most of us hope that life will be better. We would like to have had our lives be better in the past, better today and better in the future.

In a "Peanuts" comic strip, there was a conversation between Lucy and Charlie Brown.

Lucy said that life is like a deck chair: some place it so they can see where they are going, and some place it so that they can see where they are, and some place it so that they can see where they have been. Charlie replied and said, "I can't even get mine unfolded!"

So it is with us. Some of us are looking back, maybe looking back to a better time, looking back to a better spouse, a better job or maybe that wonderful church you left. Most of us are looking forward, though, hoping that life will be better. Some are living for the moment, and some are just too busy to stop and realize exactly what life is all about—

too busy to stop and think. I think that's probably true for most of us. When was the last time that you stopped and really thought about life, thought about your life in the past, and thought about what life will be like today?

BACKGROUND. Can I ask you, "What is your life like? What's your life all about?" What we are going to discover in this study is what life is all about. The book of Ecclesiastes has a very interesting title. In the Greek the title means "assembly." In the Hebrew the title is *Qoheleth* and it

means "preacher" or "teacher." King Solomon is the author of Ecclesiastes. This becomes clear when we look at verse 1. It says,

The words of the
Preacher, the son of
David, king in Jeru-
salem. Ecclesiastes 1:1
(NASB)



*Are You Wasting
Your Life Chasing
Soap Bubbles?*

If we looked at Ecclesiastes 1:12, Ecclesiastes 1:16 and Ecclesiastes 12:9, we would find other hints that this book is written by King Solomon himself. In Ecclesiastes 12:9 we are told that the author wrote many proverbs, and we know that Solomon wrote the Book of Proverbs. So it all ties together. King Solomon is the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, and I believe that Solomon wrote the book late in life. In fact, I tend to believe that he wrote it just before he died, as he looked back over life and realized what life was really all about.

1 Kings 3:6-13 tells that Solomon had asked God for wisdom. Solomon didn't ask God for riches or fame or anything else. He had asked God for wisdom so that he could judge Israel and guide Israel wisely. In response, God told him that he would be the wisest man who had ever lived,

and be the wisest man who would ever live.

Well, we find in 1 Kings that the testimony of scripture is that he was an extremely wise man. Therefore, in the Book of Ecclesiastes we're not going to find someone's rambling thoughts. We're not going to find some person who was trying to be wise. We're going to find statements from a man who was truly wise. We will find the conclusions of a man who really lived life wisely and intelligently. He had a fabulous life. If you were to look at 2 Kings 10, you would find that King Solomon had tremendous wealth, unbelievable wealth. And if you started reading at Ecclesiastes 2:4 and read through verse 10, you would find that he was extremely wealthy. In fact, I have said that he had "fun in the sun." His fun in the sun included wisdom, wine, wealth and women, and everything that he did. Solomon said there wasn't anything that he wanted to do that he withheld from himself. The message is, whatever he wanted to do, he did it. He had the money. He had the power. He was the king. His empire was enormous at this point. The empire of Israel was at its zenith. It extended all the way to the Euphrates River. He had a thousand wives and concubines. If you look at Ecclesiastes 2:9, we read this,

Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my toil and this was my reward for all my toil. Ecclesiastes 2:9-10 (NASB)

Solomon says that he was great—and he was! The testimony of scripture was, and the testimony of history is that Solomon truly was great. He was extremely wealthy and extremely wise. King Solomon said, "I did not withhold anything from myself that I wanted." I don't know about you, but I can't say that about myself. There are things that I would like that I can't obtain. I'm sure there are things that you wish that you could have, but you can't, because you don't have the money, the power or the ability. You can't have it, but Solomon did. He did whatever he wanted. He had everything he wanted. So we would think that this king was really happy, wouldn't we? We would think that this

king was fulfilled in life.

VANITY OF VANITIES. Chapter 1 of Ecclesiastes paints a different picture. The opening chapter of Ecclesiastes gives us a bottom line summary, the bottom line conclusion to life. Ecclesiastes 1:2 says,

"Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher,

"Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Ecclesiastes 1:2 (NASB)

The word "vanity" in the Hebrew is *habel* and it means "vapor, breath, worthless or empty." These are all synonyms for the word "vanity." I like the word "empty" because it more accurately describes what Solomon is saying. Sometimes I think of the word "vanity" being like a soap bubble. Vanity doesn't mean that you're looking in a mirror and you are thinking, "Oh, I am really good looking!" That is not the idea of the word vanity. The idea of vanity is more like a soap bubble: Pop! It's gone! There is nothing there. So Solomon was really saying, "Empty of empties, empty of empties, all is empty. Life is empty." In fact, the phrase, "vanity of vanities," is a Hebrew superlative. That means the phrase is accentuated or heightened. So we could put it this way, "Oh, how utterly empty life is." "Oh, how utterly worthless." "Oh, how utterly meaningless." Or, "Oh, how utterly absurd," as one author put it. "How life is utterly absurd." What is the message? Life is very hollow, but we do not stop long enough to figure that out. We don't stop long enough to realize that life is very empty and hollow and there is nothing here for those of us living under the sun. We just don't stop long enough to think about it and realize it.

WHAT ADVANTAGE DOES MAN HAVE? In verse 3, Solomon starts to explain why he has said, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Empty of empties, all is empty." The verse says,

What advantage does man have in all his work

Which he does under the sun? Ecclesiastes 1:3 (NASB)

The answer to King Solomon's question is that there is no gain. There is no profit. There is no advantage. The Hebrew word that is translated as "advantage" has the idea of "what's left over." Now think about that for a second. What's left

over? It's the idea of profit. You work and you work, and what's the profit? What is left over? What did you gain from your work? What was the advantage? The implication is that there is nothing, absolutely nothing. When he uses the word "toil," the Hebrew has the idea of labor. It has the idea of working hard, getting tired and sweating. It's a fascinating word. It's the idea that you worked and you got really tired. Then He asks, "And you did it why?" You did it to earn money. You did it to put food on the table. You did it to buy a house. You did it to buy a car. You did it for this reason and that reason. You worked and you worked, and what did you gain? What was your profit? The answer is nothing! You never stopped long enough to really think about it. You never stop long enough to really evaluate what life is truly all about. The money comes, and the money goes, and you're back at work again for more money. The money comes, and the money goes, but you're never, ever, really satisfied. That is the basic message.

What is the advantage to life? Shakespeare wrote,

Life is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

At first we might think that William Shakespeare is a little negative. But we're going to find that he was positive, when we look at Solomon's conclusions about life. We work hard and what do we really gain? Solomon's message is, nothing!

PEOPLE ARE CONSTANTLY BORN AND DIE! In verse 4 Solomon says,

*A generation goes and a generation comes,
But the earth remains forever. Ecclesiastes 1:4 (NASB)*

His message is that people are born into this world. They live life, die and are replaced by someone else. A generation comes, and a generation goes, but you don't hang around. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to be born and to hang around? His message is that you don't remain, but something does - the earth. The earth has been here for thousands upon thousands of years. We don't really know how long the earth has been here. However long it's been

here, it has been here for a long time, and it's going to be here after you die. You were born into this world, and you're going to leave this world. You were born into this world, and you huffed and you puffed during your life. You worked hard to gain something, to do something, to feel successful and to feel like you've accomplished something in life. But in reality, you're just a puff of nothing. You're just a soap bubble and then "pop!" - you're gone. The earth, it hangs around. It has been here since antiquity. It's been here for a long time ... but you won't. The earth will stay, but you won't. In the scheme of eternity, you have just arrived and you will disappear very quickly. You've worked hard and you've labored constantly, but what did you get that you can keep? Nothing! You brought nothing with you and you will leave with nothing.

THE SUN CONSTANTLY RISES AND SETS. In verse 5 King Solomon refers to the sun rising and setting to illustrate our temporary life. He continues the story. He continues the illustration. He says,

*Also, the sun rises and the sun sets;
And hastening to its place it rises there again. Ecclesiastes 1:5 (NASB)*

When he says "hastens," the Hebrew word has the idea of gasping and panting. It's the idea of being in a race. It's the idea that the sun comes up in the morning, and sets in the evening. Then it hurries and rushes to get back so it can rise in the morning and set in the evening once again. It's the idea that from man's perspective the sun comes up, the sun moves through the sky, and then sets. But there is one thing that's constant, and it's that the sun continues but not you! The sun will be here tomorrow, and it will be there for many tomorrows; but we won't because we come and we go. The sun continues day after day, month after month, century after century. When King Solomon says that the sun is hastening, panting, doing what it needs to be doing, doing what God has designed it to do, he personifies the sun as working. He reminds us that we work hard but we have no lasting reward for our labor. You come and you go, and that's it.

THE WIND SWIRLS FOREVER ON ITS CIRCUITS. In verse 6 he moves to the wind and he says,

Blowing toward the south,
Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along;
And on its circular courses the wind returns. Ecclesiastes 1:6
(NASB)

This is a very important statement because what he describes is a weather phenomenon that we know to be true as a result of weather satellites. Because of modern science we know that the wind travels on a circuit. It goes here and it goes there and never swirling. Solomon says the wind moves south and then goes north. It goes around and around on its circuits. The point is that the wind continues day after day, month after month, year after year, century after century, but you don't. You labor, you work, you try to do this, do that but you are puffing and panting just like the wind. The wind is moving effortlessly and doing its thing, but you are not going to be around very long. So you have to ask the question, "What did you gain?" "What was the benefit of all the work you did?" "What was the benefit of all your labor and your struggles, your heartache and your pain?"

WATER HAS A HYDROLOGICAL CYCLE. In verse 7, King Solomon now compares us to the hydrological cycle of water.

All the rivers flow into the sea,
Yet the sea is not full.
To the place where the rivers flow,
There they flow again. . Ecclesiastes 1:7 (NASB)

What has King Solomon done? He is referring to the hydrological cycle of water. The rain comes down on the land, the water flows into something we call a river, or a stream, or a wadi, and eventually the water flows down to the ocean. Then it evaporates, becomes a cloud, the cloud moves over the land, and the cycle starts all over again. Isn't it amazing when you think about this for a minute? The hydrological cycle of water is captured in the pages of scripture. He has described the cycle of water and the cycle of the

wind. Amazing statements in the pages of scripture. These are truths that were not discovered until "the modern era." What is Solomon's point? Solomon's point is that just like the earth, just like the sun, just like the wind, water is on a cycle. They just keep cycling day after day, year after year ... but you don't. You come and you go. You don't continue at all.

EVERYTHING IS WEARISOME. Now verse 8 is a summary.

All things are wearisome; man is not able to tell it. Ecclesiastes 1:8a (NASB)

The literal Hebrew statement is, "Man can't say it." The point is that man doesn't really understand it, so he can't really express it; he can't really describe it.

The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
Nor is the ear filled with hearing. Ecclesiastes 1:8b (NASB)

Verse 8 is very powerful because he says that all things are wearisome. That is, we don't really stop to think about the fact that we are working and working. You get up in the morning and you do what? Maybe you brush your teeth, maybe you don't. If you're a man, probably you shave your beard, maybe you don't. You comb your hair. You get a shower. You put on some clothes. You go leave home and go to work. Then you labor through the day, come back home, have a meal, do something before you go to bed, and finally go to bed. You go to sleep, and in the morning you get up and you do what? You do it all over again, day after day. Your Saturday probably looks almost like your last Saturday and the Saturday before that and the one before that. Maybe your Sundays look almost the same too. I don't know, but the point is that life is full of weariness and repetition. The wife washes the dishes, or maybe the man washes the dishes. You wash the dishes in the morning. You wash them maybe at lunchtime. You wash them in the evening—unless you like a pile of dirty dishes in your house. What happens the next day? You have to do that all over again. Or how about cleaning the house? When's the last time

that you cleaned the house once and that was good for the rest of the year, unless you're willing to accept a whole pile of dirt someplace in your house? The point is that you have to clean your house today and tomorrow, and the day after that or however often you do it. The same thing is true for pulling the weeds. The same thing is true for repairing your car. Your car breaks down eventually. If you have business with employees, you must pay them however often you pay them. The point is that you must pay them and pay them and pay them. The same thing with preparing our meals, sleeping... I mean, life is monotonous. Life is repetitively, and we don't stop long enough to think about the fact that life is ... what? Wearisome.

In fact, life is not satisfying at all. When was the last time that you looked at something and said, "Oh, I don't need to see any more beautiful things, I am so satisfied with seeing beautiful things. I am good for the rest of my life"? Solomon said, "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing." When was the last time you listened to a piece of music and you said, "Oh, I don't need to listen to any more music. I'm just satiated. I'm full up. I am just really completely satisfied"? That doesn't happen. In reality, we're never satisfied. Proverbs 27:20 says, "The eye of man is never satisfied." The same is true for the ears. We are never satisfied! Some years ago, a psychologist by the name of William Moulton Marston, asked 3,000 people the following question: "What have you lived for?" He was shocked to find that 94 percent were simply enduring the present while waiting for the future. They would describe this as "waiting for something to happen." They were waiting for children to grow up and leave home, waiting for next year, waiting for another long-dreamed-about trip, waiting for tomorrow, hoping, wishing, wanting something better and something different. Hope is what kept them motivated. Is that true of you? Are you stuck in a rut and you don't know it. You are always hoping and waiting? Or, are you just blissfully going through life, just plodding it out?

Can I ask you a question? What's your life all about? What is life all about? Is it about keeping your stuff, taking care of your stuff, seeing how much money you've have in the bank, with the markets going up and down and all over the

place? Is that what keeps you preoccupied? Then someday you're going to die, and the earth's will remain, the sun will continue panting, the wind will continue swirling, the water will keep cycling ... but you're not. So what did you gain? What is your profit? What will you get out of life, with all your labor, with all your panting, with all your struggling? Do you know what Solomon's answer is? You get nothing! You will gain nothing from all your labor.

THE REPETITIVE CYCLE WILL CONTINUE. Verse 9 and 10 is sobering,

*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. Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 (NASB)*

His message is that life is just more of the same thing. In verse 10 he says, "You aren't going to remember the old stuff." There is nothing new here on planet earth. The earth, sub, wind and water has been here long before you. Those are not new. Also, by the way, maybe you invent something new. But just wait long enough, maybe a thousand years, and what will happen? They will forget about you. Also, they'll forget about your invention because someone will build upon your invention and make something better. He says there's nothing really new under the sun. The Hebrew word that he uses for "new" isn't the idea of a new iPod or a new iPhone, a new computer, a new car or a new whatever. When he says "new," he means that it is brand new. It is something that has never been invented before and does not depend on anything in the past. In reality, every major invention that has been developed is based on some prior knowledge of something else. Today, we are recycling the old as something new.

TIME ERASES ALL MEMORY. So what advantage is there for us in all of our labor? To find the answer look at Ecclesiastes 2:11. King Solomon writes these words after he tells us about how wealthy he was, and how successful he was, and

all that he accomplished, how he didn't withhold anything from his heart.

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. Ecclesiastes 1:11 (NASB)

King Solomon answers his own question finally, "What does a man gain in all of his labor?" His answer is, "Nothing, nada, zero." His point is that life is a big fat zero. That's his point. André Maurois said,

The universe is indifferent. Why are we here upon this puny mud heap, spinning in infinite space? I have not the slightest idea and I'm quite sure that nobody else does either.

He doesn't know what life's all about. He's not sure what life's all about. Do we know what life is all about? How do we respond to his statement? Did you notice back in verse 3 that King Solomon said, "What advantage does man have in all his work which, does under the sun?" The phrase "under the sun" occurs twenty-nine times in the book of Ecclesiastes, a phenomenal number of times. It's a theme—watch this—it's a theme in the book. And when he says "under the sun," he's talking about life here on this earth, life here on this planet. His question was, what does a man gain in all of his toil that he toils under the sun or here on this earth? What he is talking about is life without God. If you have life without God, there is no meaning to life, and there is no advantage to all the stuff that we do, and life is empty. Life is hollow.

CONCLUSION - ARE YOU WASTING YOUR LIFE? Years ago I read Ecclesiastes 1, then Ecclesiastes 2, then Ecclesiastes 3, and I read all the way through the book. What I discovered was that Ecclesiastes is a very interestingly book. Chapter 1 is Solomon's introduction. It is the major theme of the book. Also, he presents the conclusion in chapter 1. Then from Ecclesiastes 1:12, almost through the last chapter, Ecclesiastes 12, he presents, illustration after illustration, example after example, proof after proof of his conclusion.

When you get to the very end of Ecclesiastes 12:13, he tells us how to respond. He gives us the answer to life. I would like you to see his answer to life. I have to admit that in my thirties, when I read this passage of scripture I became very discouraged at first. I also began to think about what was my life all about? In my thirties, I was not a pastor. I was an elder in my church and I began to ask myself, "What am I accomplishing with my life?" And I began to draw the conclusion that I did not want to waste my life.

Can I ask you, "Do you want to waste your life?" Are you're living here on this planet and you agree that Solomon's right, life is wearisome. We just chase one thing after another thing. If we are not careful, we will accomplish nothing—other than putting food on the table and living until we die. Do you agree that Solomon's right, he's absolutely right? I asked myself the question, "Am I wasting my life?"

In Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 we read his answer to life,

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil. Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NASB)

He says that the end of the matter—this is his conclusion—when all has been heard, we should fear God and keep his commandments. This is the whole duty of man. What's the answer to life? Fear God and keep his commandments. That is the priority. We don't waste our life by putting God first in our life. Do you know what I did in my thirties? I told God that He could do with me whatever He wanted. He had my life. Whatever He wanted me to do, I was willing to do.

Can I ask you, is that true of you? Who are you living for? Are you living for yourself, or are you living for God in all that you do? It's an issue of submission. I think some people—and I think it was true of me during a period of my life—I was in love with the concept of having a relationship with God, but I didn't really have a relationship with God. I think it's easy for us to be in love or be enamored with the idea of loving God, and yet not really love God. It's cool

to think, “Oh, I’m loving God,” and yet fall short of loving God like we’re supposed to. Do you know what Solomon says in Ecclesiastes? We need to put God first in our life. When we do that, then we’re not going to waste our life.

In 1 Corinthians 15:58 Paul writes to the Corinthians and says,

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord. 1 Corinthians 15:58 (NASB)

Isn’t that good news?! There is one way and only one way that you can make sure that your labor is not wasted. You labor unto God. You do what the God wants you to be doing. The Lord wants us to be faithful. The Lord wants us to put Him first in our life. The Lord wants us to be obedient. So I want to challenge you: “What is your life all

about?” I want to challenge you to put God first in your life, to make Him Number One. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus tells the audience,

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Matthew 6:33 (NASB)

Do you know what we do not need to do? We do not need to be worrying about all the things in life. Instead, we need to be worrying about only one thing --- putting God first in our life!