

The Bonfire of the Vanities
"The Meaning of Life Explained"
Ecclesiastes 12:1-14

Introduction

- [Slide #1] When I was a kid, our elementary school would put on an annual carnival that's comparable to the county fair here in town. One year, maybe third or fourth grade, the selection of carnival games was better than any previous year's carnival; they had every game imaginable. The ring toss onto the bottles of soda. Glass bottles mind you. Not the easy way the game is played now with the more forgiving plastic two liters. They had the ping pong balls in the gold fish bowls. The roll the bowling ball on the hilly track game. The three shell, slight of hand, hidden object game. And, to me, the mother of all carnival games. The softball in the peach basket game. The booth of the softball in the peach basket game had the largest stuffed animals at the carnival. And I desperately wanted to take home one of those hunormous stuffed animals.
- Do you know the game I'm talking about? Behind the counter, and tantalizingly arranged in front of those giant animals, were four or five peach baskets; each sitting on its side and each tipped upwards just slightly. The object of the game was, from behind this line on the counter, to gently toss or lob a softball a distance of five or six feet and into the peach basket. For a buck you'd get three tosses. If you were able to toss the ball in such a way that the ball came to rest in the basket you won a prize. If it bounced out they took your money. Sounds easy enough, doesn't it? I was absolutely convinced I could beat this game. The man behind the counter must have seen the bright, flashing neon S-U-C-K-E-R above my head; he took me for all I was worth. He must have robbed me of two or three month's worth of allowance. I never won. I still have bitter thoughts when I think about that game.
- Years later, I was talking to someone about this game and the frustration of losing all my money. I don't even remember who I was talking to. This guy had worked as a carnival roady in one of those traveling carnivals like we had at our school and, to my disbelief; he actually knew the inner workings of the softball in the peach basket game. He was able to explain to me why it was impossible to win. The game was rigged. Behind the peach baskets were these super sensitive springs. No matter how gently, how lovingly those softballs were tossed they were guaranteed to bounce out the basket.
- This is our final Sunday in the book of Ecclesiastes. If you take away only one thing from this book I hope it's this. Life under the sun, without God, is rigged. Life without God is like an unfair carnival game. We are constantly tempted by these huge stuffed animals that we think are so incredibly desirable. And we throw everything we have into trying to get that one thing we think will make us happy, that will bring meaning to this life, and we are robbed every single time.

Transition

The net advantage of all we pursue in this life apart from God is zero. We gain nothing. There is nothing under the sun that can bring the kind of meaning and purpose to this life that we desire. [Slide #2]

Proposition

- **God is the only one who can give meaning to this life under the sun**
- Once all is said and done, the Teacher's conclusion is that life without God is meaningless; *everything is meaningless*.¹ The message of this book is that the course of life to be pursued, the only place we'll find meaning is a God-centered life.²

Transition

Which is why in this last chapter, chapter 12, the Teacher gives...

Organizational Sentence

- **Two final pieces of advice based upon his conclusion about how this life under the sun works**
- First, he says to remember God before it's too late. And second, he urges us to fear God and keep his commands. Those two things sum up all he's tried to say about this unfairly rigged game called Life.

Transition

Look at [verses 1-7](#) for the [first bit of advice](#). [[Slide #3](#)] **Remember God before it's too late.**

Main Points

- Do you remember [Billy Crystal](#) and the movie *City Slickers*? *City Slickers* tells the story of [Mitch Robbins](#), age 39, and his two friends, all of whom are having a mid-life crisis. So they plan to escape the city and head west for a two-week cattle drive to discover what's really important in life.
- Before they leave, Mitch, who's played by Crystal, goes with his son to school for Dad's Day to share with the class about his occupation. Do you remember the scene? Instead of talking about his work as a salesman, Mitch bewilders these naive little third graders with this bitter monologue about how bleak their future is.
- He says: Value this time in your life, kids, because this is the time in your life when you still have your choices, and it goes by so quickly. When you're a teenager, you think you can do anything, and you do.
- Your 20s are a blur.
- Your 30s, you raise your family, you make a little money, and you think to yourself, *What happened to my 30s?*
- Your 40s, you grow a little pot belly. You grow another chin. The music starts to get too loud, and one of your old girlfriends from high school becomes a grandmother.
- Your 50s, you have a minor surgery. You'll call it a procedure, but it's a surgery.
- Your 60s, you have a major surgery; the music is still loud, but it doesn't matter because you can't hear it anyway.

¹ Longman, p. 276.

² *A Survey of the Old Testament*, p. 369.

- 70s, you and the wife retire to Fort Lauderdale. You start eating dinner at 2:00, lunch around 10:00, breakfast the night before. And you spend most of your time wandering around malls looking for the ultimate in soft yogurt and muttering, "How come the kids don't call?"
- By your 80s, you've had a major stroke, and you end up babbling to some Jamaican nurse who your wife can't stand but who you call mama. Any questions?³
- That's basically the Teacher's point in these first seven verses. This life will go quicker than you expect. Time is short. In verses 1-7 the Teacher give this picture of the sudden and disastrous onset of age which makes responding to God impossible. And his advice is this. Don't wait until it's too late to find what is truly meaningful in this life. Find meaning, find God now while you can. **Remember Him before it's too late.**
- Listen. **Verses 1-7.** *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them".* In other words, if you don't respond to God now, while you can, *before the days of trouble come, you may never get around to responding to God.*⁴
- *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them". 2 before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; 3 when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; 4 when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; 5 when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets. 6 Remember him--before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, 7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*
- Starting in **verse 2** the Teacher gives all these word pictures of old age. The sun and the light and the moon and stars growing dark are pictures of poor sight, diminished vision. And then the looming storm clouds gather. In other words, when you're young, and for the greater part of life, troubles and illnesses are chiefly set-backs, not disasters. You expect the sky to clear eventually.⁵ But it won't always be that way. One day the storm clouds will gather and the sky will never clear.
- **Verse 3** continues tells of a house in decline as it prepares for this last, final storm. They're unprepared. *The keepers of the house tremble.* The servants stop their work. The women at work stop their grinding; all productivity stops. The once strong men now stoop—hunched over. **Verse 4**, the doors are closed off to the outside world. "On a symbolic level, the Teacher describes the deterioration of old age. Everything falls apart."⁶

³ City Slickers (Columbia Pictures, 1991), rated PG-13, written by Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel, directed by Ron Underwood

⁴ Eaton, p. 148.

⁵ Kidner, p. 102.

⁶ Longman, p. 270.

- And then, [verse 5](#), in old age, *when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms* (when hair turns white) *and the grasshopper drags himself along* (the stiffness of old age) *and desire no longer is stirred. Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets.* We die and life is over. Just. Like. That.
- And we’ll have spent all our energy in this life on what, for what? For an experience of vanity, meaninglessness, and frustration if God is not in the mix. So we are told by the Teacher to remember God. [Verse 1](#). *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.* And [verse 6](#). Look at the text. *Remember him--before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, 7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*
- If you agree with what the Teacher says. If you know he’s right. If you’re sick and tired of this raw deal called life. Then do what the Teacher advises. God is your creator. He made you for himself.⁷ **Remember Him before it’s too late.**
- Remembering God means something specific in the language of the Bible. The advice isn’t that, as you go through life, you should occasionally have this cloudy, vague recollection of this bearded big guy in the sky. Some kind of nostalgic recall of a distant God.⁸ An occasional [Keanu Reeves](#) like “whoa, God” moment here and there. That’s not remembering. That’s called being superstitious. If all the farther you get in this life under the sun is “remembering” God at meal time or “remembering” God before the test or “remembering” God before the surgery then you have not done what the Teacher is recommending here. The Teacher would say that kind of “I know there’s a God but he really hasn’t made a difference in my life” kind of remembering absolutely pointless.
- In the language of the Bible, if you’ve remembered God it means you’ve fully integrated God into every area of your life, into every thought and action and emotion, for the purpose of complete obedience to him.”⁹ That’s remembering God. Or as [Derek Kidner](#) puts it, “For our part, to remember him is no perfunctory or purely mental act; it is to drop our pretence of self-sufficiency and commit ourselves to Him.”¹⁰
- At the heart of the biblical idea of remembrance is dedication, commitment and obedience to God. That is the Teacher’s antidote to the meaninglessness and the frustration and the absurdity of this life under the sun. **Remember Him before it’s too late.**
- And I just wonder how many people have really done this? How many people who call themselves Christians have done this? Have you done this? Or is God relegated to the distant and dusty corners of your mind only to be pulled out and “remembered” when all else fails? You were created for God. He wants all of you and at all times for all things. The message of this book is that the course of life to be pursued, the only place you’ll find meaning, is a God-centered life.¹¹ **God is the only one who can give meaning to this life under the sun.** Everything else is vanity. Remember him while you can.

⁷ Kidner, p. 100.

⁸ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 702.

⁹ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 702.

¹⁰ Kidner, p. 100.

¹¹ *A Survey of the Old Testament*, p. 369.

Transition

Let's wrap up the book with the **final bit of advice, verses 8-14**. [Slide #4] What is the meaning of life? **Fear God and keep his commandments**. Listen carefully to the Teacher's final words.

- *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!"* 9 Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. 10 The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true. 11 The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails--given by one Shepherd. 12 Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body. 13 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. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.
- In **verse 8** we get the same conclusion the Teacher started with way back in **Ecclesiastes 1:2**. *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!"* The whole of Ecclesiastes is bookended by this one conclusion. And everything in the middle, every search for meaning in the middle has been tried and has been found wanting. There is nothing under the sun that can give meaning to this life. It's all vanity. It's all meaningless.
- It doesn't matter how much money you make. It doesn't matter how much knowledge you accumulate. It doesn't matter whether all your dreams come true. It doesn't matter whether you have your health. It doesn't matter whether you have a laundry list of friends. It doesn't matter if you find love. It doesn't matter if you accomplish everything you set out to accomplish. It doesn't matter if you're religious. None of these things can make life meaningful in the way you and I are wired for meaning. *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!"*
- Believe the Teacher. **Verse 9**. He's got street cred. He's not some ivory tower academic, cloistered and pontificating on a life he's never experienced. He's *wise*, **verse 9**. He's lived out this quest for meaning. He's qualified to draw the conclusion he's drawn. His words are *true*. And they're *upright*—they're not crooked, they won't lead you astray like some fine print at the end of a commercial. All that the Teacher has learned is passed on to you now, for your benefit, **verse 11**, by the only one who can give meaning to life, God the Great Shepherd himself. God is trying to spare you from a life of meaninglessness.
- So be warned. **Verse 12**. *Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.* This verse doesn't mean that all study is tiring, although that is somewhat true. What is meant is that the study of books other than what God has revealed in the Bible, in addition to the word of God, in order to learn and get at the meaning of life is an endless, wearisome occupation. Don't waste your time. Don't waste your time with the *Koran* or the *Analects* or the *Vedas* or the *Upanishads* or the *Pali Canon*. Don't waste your time on the writings of **Mary Baker Eddy** or **Gary Zukav** or the junk published by the **Watchtower Society**. Only God's word is true. Only God's word won't lead you astray. When it comes to the meaning of life every other source is misleading. Only what's written here, in this book, will spare you from a life of meaninglessness.

- And it's with this final bit of advice the Teacher concludes his quest. **Verse 13.** The search is over. Meaning has been found. *Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter.* In other words, this is the meaning of life. *Fear God and keep his commandments.* This conclusion applies to everyone, *this is everyone's duty.* The meaning of life is to *fear God and keep his commandments.*
- Fearing God doesn't mean cowering in the corner while you wait for God to whoop you upside the head. Fearing God means having such a deep love and reverence for the one who created you that you want to do what he asks you to do; you want to obey him. That's fearing God. Later on in the love story God wrote Jesus said to those around him, *"If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me."*¹² Fear of God. Love for God. Reverence for God is further explained in the New Testament as love for and obedience to Jesus. If you do that. If that's where your focus is; loving God and caring about what he says and obeying Christ's words and remembering him through every corner and turn along life's way, you will be one of the lucky few who has discovered the meaning of life.
- **Verse 14.** *For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.* One day God will judge how and where you to choose to find meaning. Everything else apart from Him is meaningless. **God is the only one who can give meaning to this life under the sun.**

Conclusion

- During the 2007-2008 NFL regular season, New England Patriots' quarterback **Tom Brady** set the record for most touchdown passes in a regular season. He won the MVP. By age 30 the man won three Super Bowls. Whether you like him or not he's one the best who's ever played.
- That year **Steve Kroft** of *60 Minutes* interviewed Brady. Despite the fame and career accomplishments he had achieved already, Brady told Kroft that it felt like something was still lacking in his life. In his own words, "Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey man, this is what [it's all about]. I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me? I think, 'It's got to be more than this.' I mean this isn't—this can't be—all it's cracked up to be."¹³
- The net advantage of all we pursue in this life apart from God is zero. We gain nothing. **God is the only one who can give meaning to this life under the sun.** From this day forward may you find your meaning in Him.

¹² John 8:42

¹³ www.cbsnews.com and 60 Minutes (CBS, 2007)