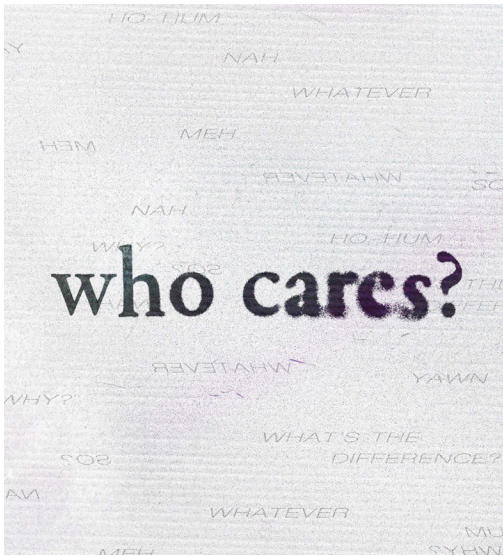




Sermon Growth Guide

September 22, 2024

Who Cares



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Who Cares? - "So?"

Ecclesiastes 1:1-14

Key Verse: "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind." (Ecclesiastes 1:14)

Big Idea: Without God, everything is meaningless.

Foundations

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher." Rarely in Scripture do we find a cry so reflective of our culture. In our secular age, we are often influenced by philosophers who perceive a world without God and conclude that everything is, indeed, truly meaningless. But if everything is meaningless, how should we respond? The message is clear: if life is ultimately meaningless, it's up to us to create meaning ourselves. Ecclesiastes addresses this situation directly, but the news isn't encouraging. The Teacher dismantles all our attempts to find meaning—whether through wealth, power, wisdom, or even striving to be "good." Time and death come for us all; it's still "meaningless."

However, English translations of the Bible can lead us astray. The Hebrew word "hevel" literally means "vapor" or "smoke." The Teacher conveys that life eludes our grasp and escapes our control. We cannot pin it down, tie it up neatly, or fully understand the mysteries we encounter. It is here that we meet God. When we acknowledge that life is "hevel," we open ourselves to trust in God rather than in ourselves. As the Teacher states, "...He has set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end...I know that everything God does will endure forever" (Ecclesiastes 3:11b, 14a). We cannot find eternity in ourselves or in this world; eternal life is found in Christ alone.

Understanding God's Word

Together, read Ecclesiastes 1:1-14. You may also want to watch the Bible Project overview of the book of Ecclesiastes at bibleproject.com.

In 1 Corinthians 15:42-58, Paul offers a perspective on what gives meaning to our lives. Compare and contrast these two passages. How does Paul provide hope in the face of apparent "hevel"?

Applying God's Word

Can you name some circumstances in your life that have made you feel like life is "hevel"? How does your relationship with Christ address these feelings? What verses of Scripture can you hold on to during those times?

Witnessing God's Word

Ecclesiastes helps us connect with our neighbors who are struggling with meaninglessness in their lives. Those in distress need people who listen well. Consider praying for those around you and practice listening to their troubles. Pray for opportunities to witness how Christ can bring meaning to their lives. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope through the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13).

“Hello darkness, my old friend; I’ve come to talk with you again.” So said Simon and Garfunkle in *The Sound of Silence*. They were readers of *Ecclesiastes*. This is a tricky book to pick up in the Bible. It is part wisdom literature, part chronicle, part journal, and all inspired, but it is hard to sift through it sometimes. Is this something God wants me to absorb as truth or something the author (tradition says Solomon) is saying to God out of frustration or sharing as part of his journey toward truth? We have to be a little careful when we read it or quote from it, but it sure fits in our series *Who Cares?* *Ecclesiastes* starts there. That’s the theme of the book: “ ‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ ” (*Ecclesiastes* 1:2) Nothing makes a difference. Nothing ever changes. And if that’s true, it gets really hard to find any motivation to do anything at all! So? Who cares. How can we overcome that level of apathy?

In 1979, the filmmaker Woody Allen printed a speech to graduates in the *New York Times*. It begins, “More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly. I speak, by the way, not with any sense of futility, but with a panicky conviction of the absolute meaninglessness of existence which could easily be misinterpreted as pessimism.” Maybe the key to life is just accepting that there is no key to life. Maybe it is all just an empty exercise. Do you ever feel that way? Last week we talked about the danger of apathy. This week I want to talk about the appeal, the temptation, the draw of apathy. There seems to be something noble, something brave about embracing the great void, the great nothingness of life. Ancient Stoicism praised apathy. Don’t care about anything; don’t let anything touch you. Be stronger than emotions and feelings and worries and fears. But apathy is a life turned grey and colorless. Solomon figured that out.

Ecclesiastes is Solomon’s journey to find meaning and purpose through all kinds of pursuits: academic and intellectual, epicurean and pleasurable (“eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die”), sexual (he had hundreds of wives and concubines), vocational, trying to work his own way into purpose and significance. In short, he tried it all. Everything is meaningless. Who cares? If, at the end of the day, I mean the real end, everything just burns up and nothing is remembered at all, the sun runs out of fuel and the earth freezes and we all are dead and gone, dust in the wind, with no one around even to remember anything we did or experienced or suffered or enjoyed, then, so what? Why even get out of bed?

The book opens with a closed-system worldview; this is all there is. It is a scientific, material-naturalist view. “Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.” (*Ecclesiastes* 1:4-5) We are trapped in a closed cycle. The wind just blows around in circles. “The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course.” (*Ecclesiastes* 1:6) It just cycles around. Maybe there’s a storm, maybe not; maybe the El Nino does its thing, maybe not. Who cares? Water too. Round and round it goes. “All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.” (*Ecclesiastes* 1:7) We’re stuck, you see? These cycles, these laws of nature, this closed system, it just goes round and round and never gets anywhere. It is tiresome. The older you get, the more you feel like you have seen it all before.

Apathy sets in. “All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.” (*Ecclesiastes* 1:8) It is so wearisome. There aren’t even words. “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the

who cares?

sun. Is there anything of which one can say, 'Look! This is something new'? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time." (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10) Of course, there have been many inventions, many advances. Aren't you getting the iPhone 16? But on another level, it's all the same. Nothing has been created that can truly break us out of the closed system, the ultimate cycle of birth, life, and death under the sun. The phrase to watch for is "under the sun." It is repeated twenty-nine times in this book. Under the sun, everything is the same, the system is closed. Every generation thinks they are the greatest, but no one finds the cure. "No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them." (Ecclesiastes 1:11) Nothing can open the system. We are stuck. "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind." (Ecclesiastes 1:14)

Listen, this is in the Bible because we have all been there. We have all stared into the void. You don't escape this life without the existential crisis. Just thumb through some Jean Paul Sartre: "Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance." "Nothingness haunts being." "I exist, that is all, and I find it nauseating." It's hard to escape cynicism. You go to a wedding and think, I'll give them five years, maybe seven. The birth announcement comes, and a voice inside says, yeah, wait until she turns seventeen and makes your life miserable. Dark. One path leads to despair, the other, to total extinction in the absolute meaninglessness of existence. Well, have a good week. Thanks for coming down to church!

I dwell on this, Ecclesiastes dwells on this, because it's in the air. It's part of our lives, yours and mine and all our friends out there in this city. Meaningless, meaningless. Smile and pretend, but it all goes away in the end. A recent Harvard study of mental health

in young adults said, "Work. Scroll. Repeat. It's not a recipe for a meaningful or gratifying life...over half of young adults (58%) said they had experienced little or no purpose or meaning in their lives in the previous month. In addition, half of young people said that their mental health was negatively influenced by 'not knowing what to do with my life.'" It is easy to succumb to apathy. Why do anything? What's the point? And my pastor wants me to take this compass in my hand and find my way into a conversation about Jesus? Come on.

Uche Anizor, in his book *Overcoming Apathy* says, "We all need purpose— young and old alike... The mantra of the purposeless is 'Why bother?' After drowning (and drowning us) for twelve chapters in the apparent meaninglessness of life, the writer of Ecclesiastes jolts us out of indifference and despair with a crystal-clear life purpose statement: 'Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man' (Eccles. 12:13). He is saying that there is a focus that can clear the fog, a purpose that can reignite passion. But if we lose sight of it, we may find ourselves growing numb and immobilized, repeating in our hearts the refrain 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity' (1:2). Apathy feeds on aimlessness." The Bible isn't telling us to give in to meaninglessness. Solomon is just expressing his feelings during that dark journey. That's what I meant earlier about this book. This is not a book to pull a single verse out of and think you're on the right track! That's not a good idea with any Bible verse, but especially Ecclesiastes. God does not want you to give in to meaninglessness; God wants to reach you in those dark places and remind you that you have meaning, you have purpose, you are making a difference, and the things you do matter to God. If they matter to God, they matter. Full stop.

Has meaninglessness set in? Lack of purpose? Is it hard to find hope? Are you in a closed system? A weather pattern

who cares?

that never changes? There is nothing new under the sun. There is no surprise we feel this way. The predominating worldview of our times is exactly what Solomon lays out here, a closed system of scientific laws and orders. This is life. If we are simply a jumble of cells, an accidental mishmash of molecules and chemical reactions, then why wouldn't you say 'who cares'? And that is exactly what we are told we are day after day, until it saps our hope and washes us in apathy.

Tim Keller was a presbyterian pastor in New York City until he died last year. He used to tell this story all the time. He said, imagine two people given jobs for the day, menial, hard labor—cleaning out grease pits or scrubbing trash cans or something. To one of them, the boss says, "Hey, hang in there. At the end of the day, I'll pay you \$100." But the other one gets told, "At the end of the day, just one day, you will receive \$1 million." Which one whistles while they work? What you believe about the future changes how you feel about the present. If you truly believe that there is no more to life than the physical material, that we are just an accidental chemical reaction, that in seven billion years the sun will burn out, the universe will drift apart and earth will be one more silent, cold rock drifting through space, not only will you be gone and I'll be gone, we will all be gone; that there will not be a single human being to even remember our names; if you allow it, that will absolutely crush your will to live. What you believe about the future, or, if I can put it this way among friends, the truth, the reality, that this is a universe made by God for God's glory and you have a role to play in that—that reality changes everything, that future vision changes your present.

We are tempted by the sophistication that dismisses all things. This is the appeal of apathy. I've seen it all a million times. There is nothing new under the sun. The leaves turn yellow, they fall to the ground. Spring arrives, they grow

again. So what? We have grown old in all the wrong ways. Children don't tire of wonder. Kids say, "Do it again! Do it again!" G. K. Chesterton wrote, "Because children have abounding vitality... they always say, 'Do it again'; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we." (G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy) Do it again, Aspens! Maybe that's what Jesus meant, you must be as little children.

Meaningless, meaningless. Everything is meaningless. There is nothing new under the sun. Yeah, if all there is is what's under the sun. But that's not all there is. Isaiah wrote, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down." (Isaiah 64:1) That God would rip a hole in the sky and open heaven to earth. Jacob wrestled with God and fell asleep with his head on a rock, exhausted. He saw a ladder between earth and heaven, with angels going up and down. When Jesus called Nathanael to follow him, Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man." (John 1:51) This world is not closed. We live in a world with windows. Jesus said of himself, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man." (John 3:13) Jesus blows the closed system open. Jesus opens heaven. Jesus makes it new.

who cares?