

Meaning Without God

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Introduction.

- A. The recent national news has brought us yet another repetition of a tragedy that has become dreary in its monotony. An alienated student named Steven Kazmierczak burst into a science lecture hall on the campus of the University of Northern Illinois with several handguns and proceeded to fire into the students there. He killed five and wounded many more before turning a gun on himself.
- B. In typical fashion, news reports on this tragedy have turned the gunman into the helpless victim of mental illness. It's a nice, neat explanation, but I don't buy it. This was no spur-of-the-moment, incoherent rampage. Kazmierczak had enough wits to go to a store several days beforehand, buy guns and ammunition, send a farewell package to his girlfriend, drive 200 miles to NIU, and find the lecture hall that would become the setting for his murderous farewell. Anybody with enough wits to do all that also has enough wits to know that killing is wrong. Besides, mental illness has been around just as long as the human race has. If depression is really the problem, how come we don't read in the history books about Farmer Bob the Civil War veteran bursting into the village church with his six-shooter and gunning down the congregation? It didn't happen.
- C. The fact that it's happening now tells us that there's something wrong with our society, and we get a glimmer of what that something is in the repeated description of this act as "senseless violence." Senseless violence and meaningless evil is precisely what this is, and those things are the inevitable companions of a nation to whom existence itself is becoming increasingly meaningless. As our country continues its retreat from a God-centered way of life, the sense of personal significance that comes with serving God also dies off. Certainly, not all those who feel that their lives are meaningless choose to go out in a hail of bullets, but for every alienated school shooter, there are thousands of men and women living lives of quiet despair.
- D. This relationship between godlessness and meaninglessness comes as no surprise to students of the Bible. Three thousand years ago, the wise king Solomon explored precisely this topic. With an almost scientific thoroughness, he investigated all the things that could make life significant and recorded his findings about those things in the book of Ecclesiastes. Our society today would do well to re-learn Solomon's lessons and profit from his conclusions. Let's look at them this morning in our search for meaning without God.

I. Possible Sources of Meaning.

- A. Solomon began his search for meaning in the same place that many people begin theirs: by looking for meaning **IN PLEASURE**. The theory goes that if something makes us feel good, then once we get enough of it, we'll be happy for the rest of our lives. Solomon had the resources to buy for himself every imaginable kind of earthly pleasure, and, as he reveals in the first part of Ecclesiastes 2, that's exactly what he did. He experimented with recreational drunkenness, he built mansions for himself, he accumulated all kinds of possessions, and he acquired literally hundreds of concubines. In short, Solomon lived the life that hundreds of millions of Americans are convinced would make them happy if only they could do it.
- B. We see just how satisfied Solomon was with all of this in Ecclesiastes 2:10-11. He had it all, and he learned that having it all meant that he really had nothing. For all of those people around us who spend their days in pursuit of pleasure, the single worst thing that can happen to them is that they get what they think they want. When they do, they find like Solomon did that it's all empty and meaningless. Look at guys like Heath Ledger. Heath Ledger had it all too: looks, money, women. Do you think that Heath Ledger died happy? Let's learn from this, friends. Let's not fall into the trap of trying to find happiness and meaning through pleasure.
- C. The next item on Solomon's checklist was the search for meaning **IN WISDOM**. Solomon, of course, had already been blessed by God with more wisdom than any other man, so he devoted himself to considering the worth of what he had been given. Just like Solomon, our country is obsessed with the search for value in knowledge and wisdom. Intelligence is something we value perhaps more than anything else. It's why we buy Baby Einstein CD's for our little kids. It's why we set aside literally hundreds of thousands of dollars so they can go to the best colleges money can buy. We think that if we're smart enough, we're set for life.
- D. Solomon reveals his conclusions about this in Ecclesiastes 2:15-16. Sure, being smart is better than being dumb, but the problem with being smart is that you figure out pretty quick how meaningless being smart really is. Like Solomon says, whether we are wise or foolish, we will still die and be forgotten. It's telling, I think, that it's not the special-needs kids whom we see turning into school shooters. It's the smart kids. It's the ones who are clever enough to recognize how pointless their existence is, and feel so trapped by that pointlessness that they become nihilistic. Intelligence leads us not to meaning, but to meaninglessness.
- E. After wisdom, Solomon tries to find meaning in yet another popular location: **IN WORK**. Solomon devoted himself not just to being king, but to being a great king. In earthly terms, he was the greatest king Israel ever had, and he spent his life doing what he could to build a great nation. People today do the same. They work

to build up the companies of which they are a part. They work to provide an inheritance for their children. They think that if they accomplish those things, their lives will have had meaning.

- F. Solomon points out the problem with finding meaning in work in Ecclesiastes 2:18-19. We can work as hard as we want, we can work as well as we want, but once we die, it all falls apart. We can't keep our children from blowing in just a few years all the money we labored for decades to accumulate. We can't keep just one idiot owner from running our cherished business into the ground. In fact, all we can be sure of is that sooner or later, those things are going to happen. How many of the great financial empires of 300 years ago are still around today? They were great once, but they all got undersold by Wal-Mart if they lasted that long. We can fool ourselves into believing that the work we do is going to mean something, but in the end, it won't.
- G. Following work, Solomon turns his attention to finding meaning **IN COMPETITION**. This too is a place where people naturally tend to look. We love to prove that we are the best. We might do it by beating all comers on the basketball court, we might do it by buying a nicer car than our next-door neighbors, but we're convinced that if we can find a reason to pound our chests and shout, "We're Number 1!" that it will validate our lives.
- H. Solomon dismisses this in Ecclesiastes 4:4. The problem with competition is that the very nature of the competitor means that he is never satisfied. Look at the New York Giants. Do you see them saying, "We won the Super Bowl this year, so we think we're just going to take next year off?" Of course not! They want to win two Super Bowls, and if they manage to win two, they'll want to win three. Sooner or later, though, somebody's going to beat them, and when it happens, all they'll find is disappointment. We can't find true meaning and significance in competition, if only because we can't stay Number 1 forever.
- I. Solomon next considers an idea closely related to competition, the idea of finding satisfaction **IN MONEY**. He's not talking here about the things money can buy. He's talking about the accumulation of money itself as a measure of personal success. For men like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, this is the way they think. Their businesses are a game, and money is just the abstract way they keep score.
- J. Solomon, of course, had as much money as anybody in the ancient world, and he exposes the pointlessness of it all in Ecclesiastes 5:10. Once we start using money as a measure of success, there is no amount that we can accumulate that will convince us we've succeeded. If we earn a million dollars, next week, we'll want two million. We will always be unhappy with our current score in the game, and be convinced that a higher score will make us happy. To those who love money, there is no such thing as "enough." They will die unsatisfied.
- K. Finally, Solomon ponders whether it is possible to find meaning **IN LIFE** itself. The idea is that as long as we are alive, as long as we continue to experience the sensations and joys of life, that we should learn to find satisfaction and meaning in the processes of existence. This is a bit more philosophical than most people manage, but it's the idea expressed by wise sayings like, "Life is about the journey, not the destination."
- L. That sounds nice, but in the final analysis, life IS about the destination. Solomon says so in Ecclesiastes 9:2-3. As the Hebrews writer confirms in Hebrews 9, it is appointed to man once to die. Every single one of us can expect that our earthly life will end. For the one who finds meaning in life, the coming of death is the ultimate in meaninglessness, and we can't stop it. As the poet Dylan Thomas said, all we can do is rage against the dying of the light. In many ways, life is a wonderful thing, but there is no ultimate significance in it.

II. God's Answer.

- A. So far, this has made for a pretty grim sermon, but once we start to think about it, this is the way that life without God is. If that's all the meaning that we come up with, why not give our lives over to meaninglessness? Why not kill a bunch of meaningless people and our meaningless selves, because in the long run, we weren't going to amount to anything anyway? Without God, that's what we end up asking.
- B. We see part of God's answer to this in Solomon's explanation of the problem in Ecclesiastes 3:11. What keeps us from finding meaning in earthly things is that God has set eternity in our hearts. At the deepest level of our being, we long to be whole, we long to be complete, we long to be infinitely satisfied. The problem is that nothing on earth can feed that kind of hunger. It's like trying to water the Sahara Desert with a garden hose. We try to find eternity in pleasure, in wisdom, in work, and in a million other things, but eternity is not something that can be contained in those earthly things. Once we realize this, we also recognize that the eternity in our hearts is the void that that can only be filled by God. Pleasure can't fill our lives with satisfaction and meaning, but God can. Wisdom can't make us fulfilled people, but God can. This constant longing appears a curse to many people, but it's really a blessing because it draws us to God.
- C. Once we recognize that, once we see that our quest for meaning finds its only possible answer in God, we're ready for the second part of Solomon's answer. We see it in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14. This is just common sense. If we can only find happiness and fulfillment through God, then it makes sense to live a life that revolves around God. It makes sense to live a life that is constantly preparing itself for divine judgment. If we think that the meaninglessness of earthly existence is bad enough, we need to do everything we can to avoid the meaninglessness of an eternity spent in the torments of hell. Fearing God and keeping His commandments is not just a possible answer to the question of our lives. It is the only possible answer.

Conclusion. If you want to find a life of meaning through God, start today by coming to Him.