

MEANING: WHERE DO WE FIND IT?
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Ecclesiastes 1:1-4

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What's the meaning of life? That is what the cynical writer of Ecclesiastes is probing. The preacher's words reflect his frustration with life in his retirement years. Reading his work is not like reading the humorous thoughts of Garfield the Cat. In fact, when we curl up with his story, we had better have a "tall glass of buttermilk."

If we examine the movement of this man's life, we might understand why he has turned into an "old grouch." To discover his problem, I want us to use our imaginations to bring our philosopher into modernity.

Just begin to imagine a modern person who is most unhappy. In the centuries since the frustrated retiree wrote, we really haven't changed. We still ask the same question about life. I feel I must share with you that there is one problem in making "The Preacher" a modern person. The pictures of the stages of this person's life weigh heavily toward the male experience. But don't worry ladies, we won't leave you out.

The first item on our agenda is to create the modern context for the development of his grouchy attitude and, most important, deal with those issues that tempted the author to transform them into little gods.

I. THE CONTEXT

First, let's create the modern context. In so doing, we will change the "Preacher's" name to Mr. Jones.

Mr. Jones is about 62 or 63 years of age. He has been retired for about one year with his wife of thirty-five years. The spouse is also retired. Like himself, his wife was successful in her chosen profession. They worked hard and now have earned the right to a more leisurely life in the Florida sunshine.

They dreamed of retiring to the warm weather of Florida. I don't know why they chose Florida; Georgia has more to offer and you don't have to drive as far. They are free now of those Wisconsin winters. They were weary of trying to start the car in 20 below weather. And all that snow shoveling; no more of this back-breaking work at 6:00 in the morning.

Mr. Jones is an avid fisherman and a skilled golfer. Mrs. Jones likes to make crafts and sell them at the arts and crafts shows. They enjoy doing many things together. Mrs. Jones goes golfing with her husband and he reluctantly tags along to all those craft shows.

The first months of their leisurely life in Florida were wonderful. No more business worries. He didn't have to worry about making payroll or what the economy might do. What about new products that might make his wat-cha-may-call-it obsolete? All those worries were over. All they have to do is soak up the sunshine and try to consume all the fish Mr. Jones is catching.

It was a grand life. But slowly and surely, the good life began to turn sour. Mr. Jones began to be moody. The freezer was full of fish and just how many holes of

golf can you play and the game continue to be fascinating. He began to watch ~~more~~ television. He was always irritable. A stable husband-wife relationship began to deteriorate. Mrs. Jones was spending more time walking along the beach, deep in thought. Frustrated, Mr. Jones began to write down his feelings in a private journal; much like "the preacher" who wrote Ecclesiastes.

II. THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE'S MEANING

Alone at his desk, he began to ponder what was the meaning for his life. As he wrote, he did some reminiscing. As the memories flowed into the front of his mind, he noticed that at each milestone of his life, there was always one priority. This ultimate reality consumed his energy.

A. WISDOM: As he wrote, his mind went back to his junior year of college.

You might remember your junior year of college. That is the time you began to think about graduating; when you have to decide on some school of study. Mr. Jones wondered what he did in those first two years of college because it is a blur. But he knows what he did. Mostly, it was one party after another. He was free from the watchful eye of his parents. He secured a fake I.D. and it was "party time."

But you can't party forever. The day was fast approaching when he was going to have to obtain a job; pay the educational debts and the beer tab at the package store. He was going to need some employable skills. Chug-a-lug champ for the entire university was a skill he knew he couldn't sell. At that junior year of college for Mr. Jones, and the future Mrs. Jones, it was time to really buckle down and study. Like the writer of Ecclesiastes, they began...to search out by wisdom all that is under heaven. The search for wisdom and knowledge was priority in their lives.

Knowledge, skills and the wisdom to use those skills are necessary for survival. A potential employer purchases from an employee the skills necessary to do a job. Business doesn't purchase what they don't need. Knowledge is important.

The Christian Church has always promoted education. We encourage our teenagers to attend Covenant class so that they can articulate their faith. Elizabeth O'Conner, in her book, *Letters to Scattered Pilgrims*, writes, "Becoming a mature Christian...means to be intellectually alive, open to new thought and in the pursuit of truth." Many of you know that for a year and a half, I have been utilizing my day off to study at CTS. The pursuit of another degree is important. I've gained fresh insight, but how important is the pursuit?

The quest for wisdom is important, as it was for Mr. Jones and Mrs. Jones. But is wisdom so important that you reject what is truly "ultimate?"

B. PLEASURE: In the solitude of his quiet room, Mr. Jones continues to brood over another stage in his life. During this period another important item began to take priority--pleasure. At 23 to 24, he began his career. Immediately, he was burning a lot of midnight oil with his new job. But he slaved away so he could purchase that new car, skis, boat, steno system and clothes. And when the weekends came, his mind was on fishing, golfing and enjoying activities with his friends and his new girlfriend. Like the writer of Ecclesiastes, he "made a test of pleasure" (2:1) as the ultimate meaning for life.

Also, you know and I know that at the age of fourteen those sexual hormones begin to stir. At the age of 25 or 30, they still haven't quit stirring. In fact, now at 28,

Mr. Jones's hormones were stirring at a most lustful rate. Madly in love or lust with the future Mrs. Jones, they set their wedding date. After a most pleasurable honeymoon, they both return to their careers.

When they weren't at work, they were at play. Besides the bedroom, there were all kinds of activities and parties to attend. With all this engagement in pleasure, Sunday mornings were a time to engage in that most blissful pleasure -- sleep.

To engage in playful pleasure is important for our emotional and spiritual health. One author has even proclaimed that "We have a God-given duty to enjoy our existence."

But there were costs to Mr. and Mrs. Jones focusing on pleasure. Life seems to always have ups and downs. There was "blue" Monday when they had to return to work. Like a drug addict, after experiencing one high, they were always looking forward to the next fix. T.G.I.F. was truly "thank God it's Friday" for them.

C. MONEY: Well, as you might guess, it does take money to enjoy the good life. It takes money to feed, clothe, and shelter a family. And, with all these fun-times, it wasn't long before Mr. and Mrs. Jones were the proud parents of Johnny and Susie.

Mr. and Mrs. Jones had produced the allotted 2.2 children. Mrs. Jones had to step out of the work force for a few years. Mr. Jones worked harder to succeed and increase their cash flow. He was on the cash flow merry-go-round. There was more flow than cash. But the kids soon went to school and Mrs. Jones returned to her career. Our hero even managed to purchase a business and financially, things began to look up for them. Finally, they could build a nest egg for the kids' college and for retirement--dream of retirement.

Brooding at his desk, Mr. Jones remembered how, as they increased their investments and work load, scheduling became a problem. Johnny had to be at soccer practice at the same time that Susie had to be at violin lessons. The family dog also suffered. There were days when he pranced around in extreme distress, waiting for someone to take him for a walk. After all, the business and their careers were of major priority. Financial security was important.

If they had to work late very often, they would resort to sleeping late on Sunday to catch up on their rest. Just let the kids get dressed and walk to Sunday School. Oh sure, they made it to church occasionally, but it didn't mean much to their busy lives. Now, it's no wonder that Mr. Jones is at his desk frantically trying to discover what is really meaningful. Mrs. Jones is walking the beaches late into the night. They have even begun to pray. They are like the Preacher in Ecclesiastes who wrote:

"So, I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun.(2:20)

Mr. and Mrs. Jones, in their retirement years, were suffering from years of spiritual mal-nourishment. Specialists in gerontology tell us that the suicide rate goes up dramatically for a person over 60. We understand why, when people leave God out of their lives for 60 years.

CONCLUSION

At every stage of our lives, there is the temptation to put God in the back seat. At the end of his ramblings, the writer of Ecclesiastes put God in the front seat with him. He wrote: "Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of (God's children)."

There is hope for us who sit here in God's house. We are here because we are seeking to keep God the priority in our lives. And we wouldn't need a glass of buttermilk to do it!