



©2002 Timothy Ministries. Reproduction of any part of this document in works for which readers will be charged is strictly prohibited without the explicit permission of Timothy Ministries for such use. PERMISSION IS HEREBY GRANTED to quote from this document in noncommercial works so long the following notice is included with the quoted material: ©2002 Timothy Ministries, www.tmin.org, used by permission.

Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans...

John Lennon

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes and The Meaning of Life

By Roderick A. Graciano
Director, Timothy Ministries

Philosophy's Only Problem

The book of Ecclesiastes, source of novel titles and folksong lyrics, inspires many readers with its pithy sayings and quotable metaphors. I suspect, however, that few readers have grasped the central importance of Ecclesiastes' message to the Christian worldview. Nor have many understood the key, offered by the book's "Teacher" (or "Preacher," Eccl. 1.1), to the secret of a meaningful life. The Teacher's topics in Ecclesiastes range from things like "wisdom" to "flies in the ointment," but his incessant refrain is the declaration of where meaning in life is *not* found. By ruling out all the things in which we might *vainly* hope to find meaning, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes points us to *the one true source* of a meaningful life.

"Why does life have to have meaning?" someone occasionally asks. The question usually reveals an attempt by the asker to deny responsibility to a Purpose-Giver; but I have yet to meet anyone who is truly content to live with a total void of meaning and purpose. Nevertheless, sinful humans *are* prone to equivocate and procrastinate in dealing with the big questions of life, like the question of meaning. Therefore, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes presses his readers to deal with the big questions by reminding them of the issue of *death*. "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting," he says, "for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart," (Eccl. 7.2). Intersecting nicely with the Teacher's beliefs, Albert Camus once said that "death is philosophy's only problem."¹ Right he was, but we tend to avoid

that one philosophical problem of death along with all the other big questions. In her humorous book, *Brit-Think, Ameri-Think*, Jane Walmsley, an American married to an Englishman, writes,

The single most important thing to know about Americans—the attitude which *truly* distinguishes them from the British, and explains much superficially odd behavior—is that *Americans think that death is optional*. . . . There’s a nagging suspicion that you can delay death (or—who knows?—avoid it altogether) if you really try. This explains the common preoccupation with health, aerobics, prune juice, plastic surgery, and education.²

We Americans certainly do fixate on increasing our longevity! Trends forecaster, Faith Popcorn, calls “slowing or reversing the aging process” our “new national pastime.”³ The fact is, however, that we’ll fix our attention on any little thing that promises to enhance the enjoyment of our lives while distracting us from its eventual termination. To use a Kierkegaard phrase, we indulge in “tranquilization by the trivial.” Therefore, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes must press us to face the truly important problem of death, and closes his great book with a sobering poem on death and its precursors:

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before...
the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark...
when the keepers of the house [i.e., the muscles] tremble...
when the grinders [i.e., teeth] cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows [i.e., eyes] grow dim;
...when the almond tree blossoms [i.e., the hair turns white]...
Then man goes to his eternal home
and mourners go about the streets.
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,
and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

If we will face this problem of death squarely, and recognize that even now it comes galloping swiftly, then we are prepared for the Teacher’s message about *vanity*.

What Is Vanity?

“Vanity of vanities,’ says the Teacher, ‘vanity of vanities! All is vanity’” (Eccl. 1.2, NRS). What does that mean? The Teacher’s statement is broad and forceful, but what does he mean by *vanity*? The English word *vanity* translates the Hebrew word *hevel*, which means *breath*,⁴ and connotes something that is short-lived and transitory. *Hevel* does *not* mean “meaningless,” as the NIV and other versions unfortunately translate. *Hevel* is a noun, not an adjective, and the NIV translators should have recognized that the quality of being ephemeral does not make something *meaningless*.⁵ No, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes simply takes us on a tour of all the ephemeral things that we lionize in life, and brands them as short-lived vapors. Do you value wisdom (ch. 1)? It’s vanity! Are you pursuing pleasure (ch. 2)? Vanity again! Are you dedicated to your career (ch. 4)? Vanity! Is wealth your goal (ch. 5)? Vanity of vanities!

What’s the point? Are wisdom, pleasure, work and wealth wrong? No, neither are they meaningless nor futile. They are simply unworthy of being pursued *for their own sake* because in and of themselves they are *vain*.

What Kind of Things Are Vain?

Things That Are Contingent

Vain things are essentially contingent. They depend upon something else for their existence. This of course includes everything material. The subatomic particles of every atom of every molecule in the universe are held together by the will of the Son of God (Col. 1.17). Should He for a moment lift the finger of His thought from them, they (and we) would instantly disintegrate back into the nothingness from which God created all things. When we realize this, we begin to understand what is most *real*.

Consider how the resurrected Jesus entered locked rooms (John 20.19,26). There may be a complicated technical explanation for how He did this, involving multiple dimensions or such, but when many people read about Jesus suddenly appearing in locked rooms, they wonder if he was some kind of a ghost or a vapor-being that seeped through keyholes or wafted under the door. The reality is probably that Jesus walked through the walls like we walk through fog. He is much more solid and real than stone and plaster consisting of molecules and atoms held together by His own mind. He is the one non-contingent entity in the universe. He depends upon nothing else for His existence, and thus is the most real and solid thing that exists. In contrast, everything else depends upon something else for its existence, and thus can—and much of it will—finally cease to exist and be lost to us.

Everything That Is Temporal

Not all contingent things will cease to exist, but those that are vain will, for they are also inherently temporal. They will not follow us from time into eternity. If we dedicate our lives wholly and solely to them, we will enter eternity with nothing. “You can’t take it with you,” we remind one another. That is *not* true of all things, but it *is* the nature of vain things.

Things That Are Partial

Vain things are also inherently partial. They are a part of the whole of life; they are not themselves what life is all about. Argentine pastor, Juan Carlos Ortiz illustrated this well with a story about work. Juan Carlos once asked an overly busy man, “Why do you work?”

“Why do you think?” the man replied, “to make money.”

Juan Carlos pressed him, “Why do you want to make money?”

“Are you crazy? To buy food and gas and stuff like that.”

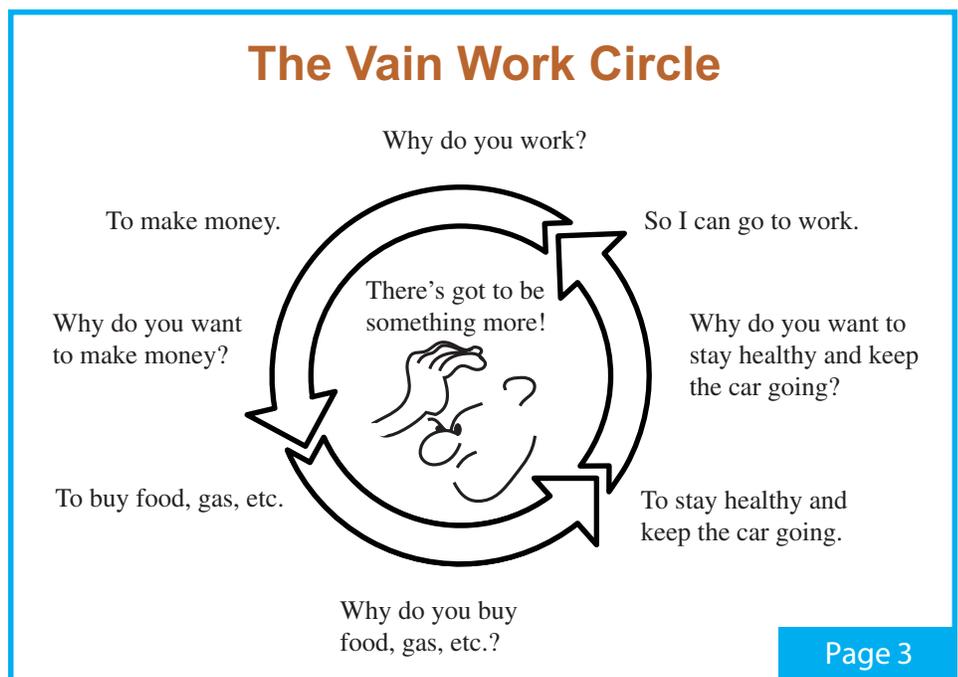
“Why do you want to buy food and gas?” Juan Carlos continued. “Well, to stay healthy and keep the car going.”

“Why do you want to stay healthy and keep the car going?”

“So I can go to work!”

It turned out that the man was just *working in order to work*. No doubt he would find a little more purpose in his labor if he were to take time for deeper reflection, but his conscious drive was to just keep working and advance in his job.

Like gerbils, many



people live out just this kind of treadmill existence. Yes, the picture is oversimplified. Real people don't just work to work. They work toward vacations and retirement. Unfortunately, vacations never fully compensate a person for an otherwise unfulfilling job, and the hoped-for retirement, if attained, often proves as pointless as the preceding career. Some career people look back on a lifetime of striving for the future and realize with regret what John Lennon sang in his song, Beautiful Boy: "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." In other words, they realize that while they poured everything into their career, they missed an abundant amount of life going on around them; their work had been only a part of life, not the whole. The more blessed people realize this earlier in life. They see the vanity of work-for-its-own-sake and say to themselves, "There's got to be something more!"

What's The "Something More"?

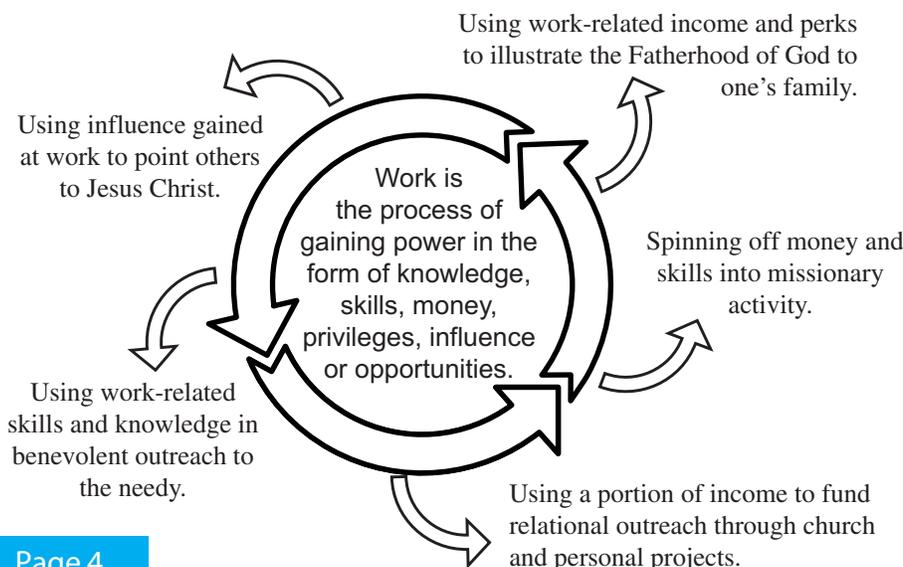
Indeed there *is* more to life and the Teacher points us to it. The "something more" that we seek is all that which *isn't vain*, in other words, those things that are neither contingent, temporal nor partial. Is there anything that fits this description besides God Himself? Yes, there are three things that remain: faith, hope and love (1 Cor. 13.13). These things are not God Himself, but they are solid, real and enduring because they are aspects of God's eternal nature. They are relevant to us because they form the contours of what a "whole" life should look like. They are the three essentials of *relationship*.⁶ It is not my purpose in this article to analyze the nature of relationship, but only to identify relationship as the one bundle of real things we can take with us beyond the grave. Relationship is the one treasure besides God Himself that is not vain, assuming it is a relationship that includes Him. Any relationship pursued by God's grace and for Christ's sake has ultimate value because we will be able to enjoy it and deepen it for eternity.

The Fruitful Work Circle

Once we understand the ultimate value of redemptive relationship, we can escape our treadmill lifestyle and modify the diagram that illustrates our working life. Now, instead of a work cycle endlessly repeating itself with no fruit but its own repetition, we realize that the ultimate purpose of any occupation and the thing that will give it meaning, is to invest the power we gain from it in relationships *now*. God intends that we gather up the power we gain from our work, be it money, skills, influence or other assets, and use it to move other people toward Jesus and conformation to

His character. Of course we should apply this truth first in our own homes. The fruit of our labors should enrich the *relational* life of our families now, in the present. Then we should spin off assets to support local ministries, like our church and our own personal outreach to neighbors and friends. Then we should invest in missions by participation that is more than financial if possible. As we spin off the fruits of our labor to invest in relationships that will last forever, we will simultaneously be investing in the most important relationship of all,

The Fruitful Work Circle



our own relationship with our Creator and Father.

The Teacher sums it up this way in Ecclesiastes 12.13 (NKJ): “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For *this is man’s all.*” Many Bible versions translate this last phrase of Ecclesiastes 12.13 differently with: “for this is the whole duty of everyone.” However, the underlying Hebrew text simply says, “for this is all-of man.” The New King James Version seems to have captured the sense best, as given above, as have Arnold and Beyer in their Old Testament survey where they write, “To obey [God] is to be truly human and to reach our greatest potential as part of his creation.”⁷ And *how* does God intend that we obey Him and reach our greatest potential? By loving Him and loving our neighbor, i.e., by investing in eternal relationships. This is the Teacher’s philosophy and the Christian’s worldview: The Triune God is the *most real* entity, and relationship with Him is our *summum bonum*, i.e., our highest good from which all other good proceeds. Prioritizing relationship with God as our highest good, allows Him to integrate all the parts of our lives—parts which would be *vanity* by themselves—into a meaningful whole. It’s this integration that gives us true fulfillment and puts the unpleasant issue of death in its proper perspective. This is the Teacher’s secret to a meaningful life.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God*, p. 158.

² Walmsey, Jane; *Brit-Think, Ameri-Think* (Penguin Viking, New York, 1987), pp. 2,3.

³ Popcorn, Faith; *Dictionary of the Future* (Hyperion, New York, 2001), p. 3.

⁴ See Isaiah 57.13.

⁵ A kiss, for example, is short-lived but packed with meaning.

⁶ Any relationship of true value must have trust in transactions, the expectation of blessing and the assurance of acceptance: faith, hope and love.

⁷ Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering The Old Testament* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1999), p. 329.