

Gratitude — Ecclesiastes 1-2, Philippians 4:8,9



John August Swanson, Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes grapples with how meaningless life can feel. In contrast, Christ offers a meaningful life to those who love and obey him. Repeatedly in the book the author concludes that the best one can do to find meaning is to be grateful for ordinary things. In Christ, we know how much joy there is in life, recognizing all of God's good gifts, including salvation and every spiritual gift.

Twenty-seven times the author of Ecclesiastes referred to life “under the sun”, which can be interpreted as ordinary, natural life. His complaint of meaninglessness is repeated 28 times. He expressed boredom with life's repetitiveness, and started on a quest to see what might be able to give meaning. He began with developing his intellect, then pleasure, accomplishment and hard work. Nothing seemed to give meaning. All of these things can add joy to our lives, but we, too, find that they do not bear the weight of being the source of meaning for us..

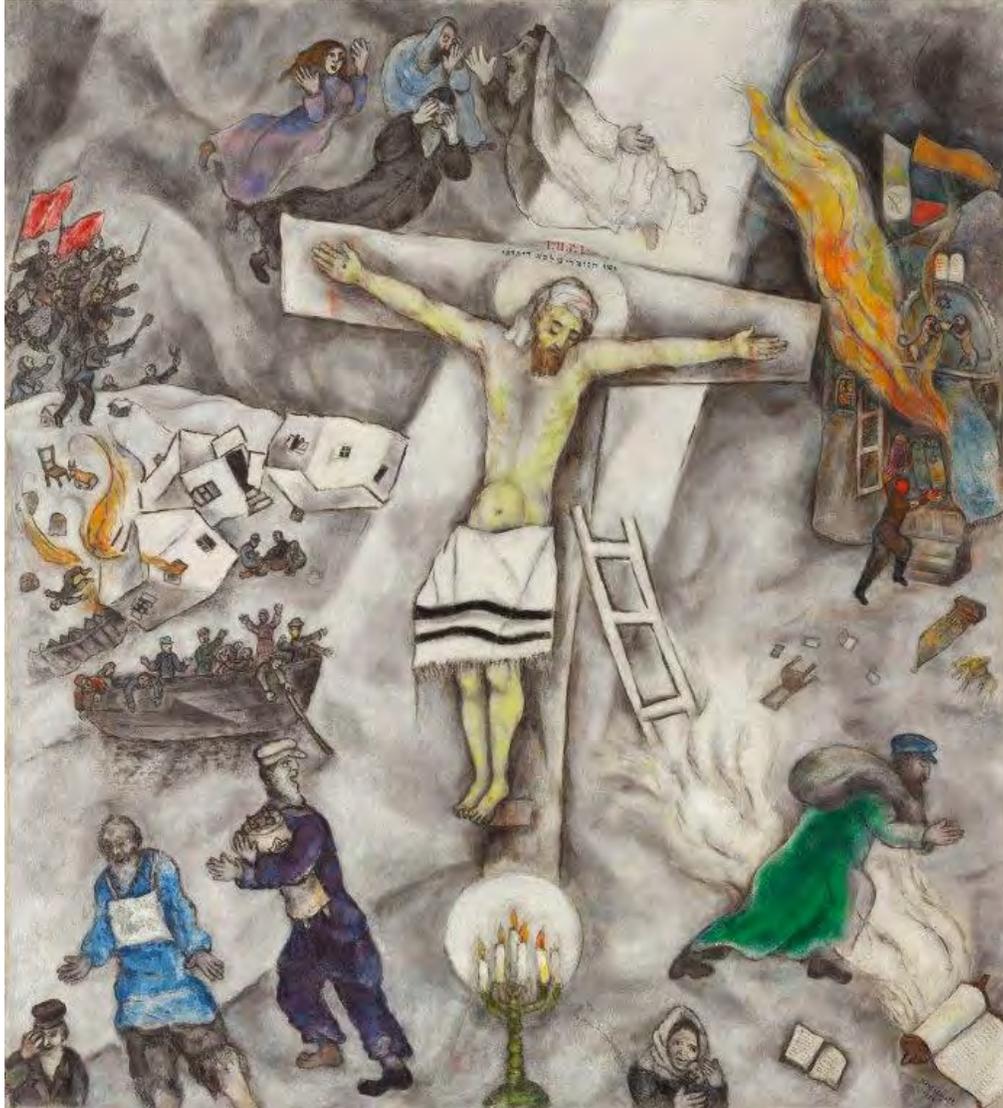
This book seems particularly well-suited to the skepticism and negativity about life and its purpose that infects our postmodern world at times. When we watch the news we are tempted to discouragement over the repetitive cycles of violence, poverty, and injustice. In moments of despair or depression or discouragement we ask with this author, “What is the point of life?”

However, at the end of these chapters, he concludes there is some meaning in gratitude for ordinary life. Even on a naturalistic level, gratitude has a positive impact on our sense of well-being. In the book he continues to offer ideas of things to appreciate: food and drink, satisfaction in work, gaining wisdom and knowledge, enjoying the results of our work, good health, having fun, giving generously, and living happily with your spouse.

I appreciate the affirmation that God values our questions. The teacher of Ecclesiastes struggled with how discontent one can be even when life is full of good things. There is much about life that is confusing, and philosophizing and trying to figure things out are apparently just fine. Part of accepting our human vulnerability is realizing how much we don't know and don't control, and to stop struggling against that. Gratitude is a good antidote.

How much is gratitude a part of my life?

Life and death— Ecclesiastes 3-6, I Corinthians 15



Marc Chagall, White Crucifixion

The author of the book is preoccupied with death, repeatedly blaming death for making life meaningless. We know that Christ has overcome death which completely changes our perspective. The author of Ecclesiastes thought that we will not be brought back from death to enjoy life in the future. Because of oppression he says that the dead are better off than the living. Wealth is meaningless because we take nothing with us when we die. He pointed out that none of us can prevent the day of our death, and called it a dark battle.

In the midst of his gloom about death, he mysteriously wrote that God has planted eternity in our hearts. Christ fulfilled that promise by bringing us life that lasts forever. As Paul wrote, if our hope in Christ is limited to this life, we are deceived and miserable. But because Christ has been raised from death, we can be also. Death has lost its sting.

In his famous poem about how life includes times of wildly different experiences, he began with reference to birth and death. He did not know that at the appointed time, Christ would be born, would die, but would also conquer death and make it possible for us to be brought back from death. On this side of the resurrection, we know that despair about death is unnecessary. When our time to die arrives, we who are believers can face that moment with hope.

What do I think about death, my own or that of others?

Accepting suffering — Ecclesiastes 7-9, I Peter 1:6



Henry Ossawa Tanner, The Raising of Lazarus

Christ's example of suffering serves to remind us that God's people must endure suffering with grace and humility, and that the results of suffering have great benefits. His many interventions in the gospels to alleviate suffering also encourage us that these transformations are an expected part of life in the Kingdom of God.

From Chapter 7 to the end of the book, the author offers wise proverbs, and they tend to be encouragements to embrace the difficulties of life, not only what is

positive. Death continues to be a theme as the uncertainty of life. We are given proverbs to remind us we cannot expect everything to go our way: “Enjoy prosperity while you can, but when hard times strike, realize that both come from God. Remember that nothing is certain in this life.”

In our time, many are teaching us to have increased faith for God’s guidance, provision, healing, and blessings. These are godly and biblical things and the awakening of faith is a great gift. “Prosper” and “prosperity” occur 111 times in scripture. When I have heard these faith-filled people present that God also expects us to endure suffering with grace, I am reassured, because this, too, is biblical. To accept the trials and difficulties of life as part of God’s purposes, including his refining purposes, gives us a mature character able to wisely guide others through their difficulties. There is a subtle balance here between faith and acceptance. At the root of both is deep commitment to God’s trustworthiness.

I want to be wise when I see that others are struggling, or even when I am struggling, and to acknowledge that God does allow things we would prefer not to happen. That is a time to ask for grace to stay close to him. We can take one of the positive proverbs as our hope: the face of a wise person becomes suffused with light and softness.

Do I face my own suffering or that of others with perspective and wisdom?

Meaning through obedience — Ecclesiastes 10-12, Philippians 4:11-13



Caravaggio, The Conversion of Saint Paul

Meaning in life becomes possible by knowing God's love in Christ. Even the mundane becomes meaningful in the context of a loving and obedient life. The author of Ecclesiastes snapped photos of the world as it is with all its beauty, pain, and difficulty, and he came to what he called his "final conclusion". The end of his quest was this: we should reverence and obey God.

When I learned that Ecclesiastes is read during the Feast of Tabernacles, I was puzzled at first. Then I could see that it matches well remembrance of the repetitive forty years of wilderness wanderings when life could have seemed quite meaningless. The presence of God with his people in the tabernacle would have been a constant reminder to fear and obey, the thought with which the author ends his book.

The gloomy philosopher-king is such a contrast to joyous Apostle Paul. The king had every comfort, privilege, a beautiful home, beautiful women, good food, and delicious wine, yet he struggled to find meaning. Paul had opposition, poverty, no home, no wife, times of hunger, and yet he found constant meaning in his life. The king struggled for contentment; Paul could say he was content no matter what happened or what he had. The king was on a search for wisdom; Paul had found all wisdom in Christ. The king came almost reluctantly to the conclusion that obedience to God brings meaning, whereas Paul made a headlong plunge into a life of meaningful obedience.

As we continue on our pilgrimage through life, whenever tempted to feel like it is meaningless, a return to Christ as the center can renew our perspective and make clear what our task for this moment might be. In acts of faith and obedience, meaninglessness and despair melt away. Paul's faith and ministry can serve as a better model to find meaning than the restlessness in this book. But how reassuring that God knows, affirms, and lets us engage with those inevitable uncomfortable feelings.

What am I finding gives meaning to my life?