

NOTHING + NOTHING = NOTHING

ECCLESIASTES 1:3-18

The following are resource questions that you can use with your Care Group for discussion. They are based on the sermon preached on Sunday, April 10, 2011, by Rev (Dr) Arnold Wong at the Grace Baptist Church, Singapore. The sermon is available online at <http://www.gracebap.org.sg/worship/seriesX.html>.

INTRODUCTION

It is easy to fall prey to the notion that there is some way to achieve lasting fulfillment in life apart from God. We find some activity that is gratifying. We begin to excel at school, business, sports, politics, or even parenting. Achievement at a high level is satisfying – for a time. But when reminders of mortality grab our attention, like the catastrophic quake and tsunami in Japan, it becomes clear that we are building our “houses on sand” (Matthew 7:26-27).

Some people may take issue with this and defend that our lives count for something by our achievements, mentioning people like Winston Churchill, Gandhi or John F. Kennedy and a host of many other distinguished people in history. Didn't they leave a legacy even though they might not be equated as Christian leaders? Aren't they fondly remembered?

First, keep in mind that Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature; and this particular genre describes reality in the way that usually occurs for *most* people – while a few exceptions to the general rule will always occur.

Second, it is not a good bet to think that you will be in that very small minority which is the exception to the rule.

Third, history may remember you differently than you ever imagined. Hitler is certainly remembered differently than he imagined. So are Stalin and Lenin. And the list goes on. Even Mother Theresa, for all the adulation she received, was criticized by some people. In fact, during Mother Theresa's funeral, various criticisms were leveled against her work. So if Mother Theresa is not immune from harsh criticism by some, it is unwise to believe that a legacy is a good way to stave off the futility of finding ultimate meaning in life apart from God.

Fourth, as the years pass, people tend to forget you. The three people mentioned (Churchill, Gandhi and Kennedy) are well-known figures of the twentieth century. But their popularity will fade with time. Most people are not familiar with various luminaries of history like Charlemagne or Erasmus. Going back further, how many are familiar with the great Roman military leader, Scipio Africanus? (nicknamed “the Roman Hannibal”, as well as recognition as one of the finest commanders in military history).

No, our lives cannot be based on our achievements...

Much of what we study in this passage resonates with our experience. In the political scene, leaders who were once household names are soon forgotten and others take their place who, in future generations, will suffer a similar oblivion. Similarly, those who work in institutions such as colleges know how quickly the fleeting generations forget those who were once at the centre of the institution's life.

Solomon, the writer of Ecclesiastes searches both the material world and human experience to find examples that demonstrate the truth in this study: Nothing + Nothing = Nothing.

Indeed, nothing makes sense... and Solomon will have more to say than this, but facing up to the reality he so powerfully depicts is a necessary foundation for hearing what comes in subsequent chapters in Ecclesiastes.

PRINCIPLE

This study shows soberly and clearly what the world is like when we leave God out of the picture.

1. Life is characterized as ‘labour’ and ‘toil’ (v. 3) – (i) physical effort and (ii) mental anguish.
2. Like human life, the creation (of nature) is full of activity, yet none of it reveals a purpose or leads to a consummation (vv. 5-7).
3. There is no sense of history going somewhere, and the whole universe seems to have no meaning (vv.8-11).

APPLICATION

1. Remind ourselves of God's evaluation of the human predicament.
2. Evaluate the various substitutes for God that we might be tempted to believe will bring lasting fulfillment.
3. Recognize that one must first despair of one's lostness before one can truly appreciate the gospel of God's grace.

DISCUSSION

1. Can you see the wisdom in Solomon's giving such an abrupt and pessimistic introduction? Why?
2. If there is "nothing new under the sun," why do we continue to act as if there is?
3. In what areas of life are you most tempted to "chase after the wind"?
4. Are you pleased with your life? Is there something you can do about it?
5. Do you think God is pleased with your life? Be honest about it?

PRAYER

Our heavenly Father, help us to be honest about the futility of life 'under the sun' so that we can truly appreciate what You offer through Christ and take the correct steps in that direction. Amen.